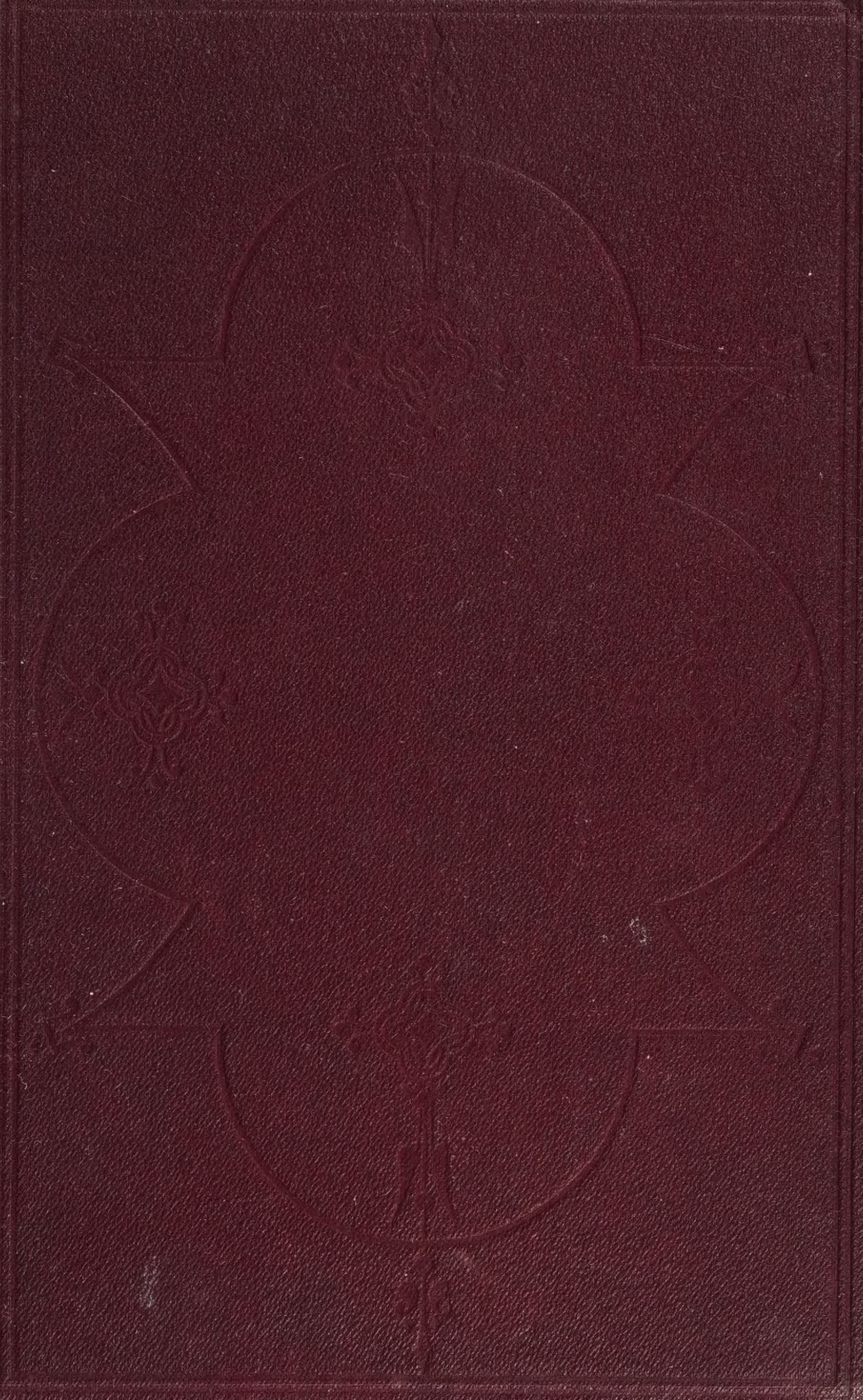

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A FOOL'S PARADISE.

A Novel.

BY

THOMAS ARCHER,

AUTHOR OF "STRANGE WORK," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.
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BOOK I.

A FOOL'S PARADISE.

CHAPTER I.

THE FAIRHOES OF FAIRHOE.

There are so many ingenious ways of beginning a story in order to show the reader that the author is entirely original and independent, that one is confounded amidst the embarrassment of variety, and, after a fruitless effort to fix upon some method startlingly picturesque, it is a positive relief to return to that well-known formula which, like an ancient mansion, is too well-founded and too convenient to be abandoned on account of its age.

For this reason, let us say at once that, on a very wet day in the first half of the present century, a solitary horseman might have been seen making his way along a flat high road amidst a flat country—that is to say, in the county of Suffolk.

There are few places on the earth's surface where a steady downpour can be better appreciated than in that dish of land which is formed by the eastern counties of England, and this was the sort of day to tax its capacity for holding its own—or in other words, for holding moisture—to the very utmost. The green lush pastures were all oozes of grass and water, the hedgerows had dripped and dripped till pools were worn in the clay lanes, and the cart ruts had widened into rivulets deep enough for bathing-places for village truants. The horses in the fields cowered under the lee of the stunted pollards, whose outlines were all dimmed and blurred by a watery veil. The birds chirped uneasily as they fluttered amidst the branches of the trees—just budding in that early spring-tide—as though they had some traditional recollection of Noah's dove. The very crows cawed gravely in their snug retreats in barn roofs or spires, nor ventured down into the flat meadows, for they knew that no sensible worm would come out to take the air at the risk of being drowned. The whole dreary scene was overhung with a leaden-coloured pall of cloud, which seemed to sink lower down upon the earth as night came on.

And yet there were redeeming features beyond that long dull, level country, where the flat dish rose to a rim, and undulating meadows, fresh with the vivid green of spring, alternated with glimpses of tender woodland, which only required the sun to brighten them into beauty. Even such pale gleams as had shot through the clouds in the earlier part of this very day had lighted up a long stretch of gentle slopes, where the reflections of the sky made varied shadows upon the tints which lay like the colours on a map, showing pasture, meadow, and arable, with the clustered ricks and homesteads round a village spire, dotting the smooth surface here and there with flecks and patches of red brick or white stone.

These things seemed to have little influence on the traveller, who, at a turn of the road, urged his horse forward more briskly. From the steady pace at which he kept on, and by the certainty with which he now and then made a short-cut down some miry by-lane, it was evident that he knew the country well, and was making the shortest way to one of the most picturesque of all these dotted villages, standing on the rim of the dish, with a little burst of woodland of its own, and a glimpse of a long, low white house beyond the trees, separated from the straggling outskirts of the hamlet by an outlying farm.

As he turned sharply from between the hedgerows into the road again, he stopped, with a grim, bitter smile, and pulled up his horse for a moment, as he looked towards the place, the name of which was painted on the tollgate just before him—"Fairhoe."

The man who came out to open the gate stared a little, and, as though not quite certain whether he should greet him or not, put his hand to his hat, and said nothing. He knew him well enough, though it was three or four years since he had last seen him pass on the same road. He was scarcely the sort of person whom, having once seen, you would easily forget—not that there was anything very remarkable in his appearance, but because he was one of those on whom time makes no other change than to carve deeper the lines which had begun to show upon the face in youth; to frost and thin the hair a little perhaps; and to make the light, spare figure leaner and harder. There are many such men, who in advancing age look more like themselves than ever—their identity intensified by time, as though the photograph of their youth had been deepened and made less delible by every sun that shone upon it. There he was, with every lineament of his former years brought into stronger relief by the lines that had come with age—the bent brows, the furtive eye; the thin face, with the muscles set into one sneering expression; the spare aristocratic contour of feature, spoiled by the sensual under-lip and pointed chin; the wiry figure, with its reserve of force; the cold, mocking look, which was less repulsive than the temper it was meant to hide. All these things were such strong developments of what had been his youth that he might have been mistaken for his own father. It was so much more likely that he would have had a son like his former self than that any flower of youth could blossom into such bitter fruit so soon.

In some confused way the man at the turnpike seemed to be struck with this fact as he slowly swung the gate back after picking up the money that had been tossed to him, and receiving a spatter of mud from the horse's heels as his rider passed on.

"If that ain't Muster Ralph there ain't no truth in them there pictures at th' big house, an' yet he is mortal like what his father shood a ben to make sooch a young man as he was thirty year ago. Boost him, he'd a rode roughshod over me if he'd a had his will when I were a white-haired lad and warn't quick enough wi' the gate o' the old squire's paddock. When Muster Ralph shows his face it bodes no good to Fairhoe, if what folk say be true;" and, as if to shut out the face and all the evil that belonged to it, the man went into his little wooden hut and slammed the door against the rain.

As it will be a good eleven minutes' ride before the horseman will reach his destination there will be time enough to mention a few particulars regarding Fairhoe itself, with just so much of its history as properly belongs to the present narrative.

Whether the family took its name from the place, or the place was called after the family, was a matter which had received considerable attention from one or two of the most eminent archæologists of the district in days when such things were considered of importance.

Whatever may have been his origin, it is certain that the founder had cherished the opinion that no title could add to his personal worth and dignity. A noble truth, this, and one well worthy of such cherishing as should lead to true independence; but, at the same time, one which may end in a wretched misconception of the worth of true rank—one of those sentiments which, when they become traditional, are in danger of losing their strength and flavour, just as good old wine may at last sicken and turn to mere poor washy stuff, with a proud pretence of vinous virtue, but worse for real use than sound twopenny beer.

To be a Fairhoe of Fairhoe was a titular distinction above any honour which could be conferred by princes. This was the tradition bequeathed by a proud yeoman with an unsullied name to his descendants, and this was true as long as Fairhoe held it with a simple reverence; but, generations afterwards, the pride which had begun righteously in love for freedom and virtue, ended in despising titles, and the wine of the good name lay on the lees of the past, where it turned sour and hard. There was nothing genial in it. One Fairhoe was a griping landlord, who ground down his tenants; another was a reckless debauchee, who pawned the family plate for the cause of the first Charles, and then, being snubbed in a Royal manner, turned to the Commonwealth; a third was an amateur lawyer, who quibbled continually, and died surrounded with notices of action from half the landowners in the county. It took three generations to clear off the debts incurred by this amateur litigant; and, with such pinching and scraping, that a wicked wit had nicknamed his family "Fairhoe's lean kine," the son contrived to hold the estate and pay the interests on the mortgages. These mortgages were not all cleared, even in the time of his grandson. There were debt and difficulty still; but we all know how deeply rooted the old county families are in this country. They belong to the very land, as the land belongs to them; and the stability of their position may be found in that sort of ownership which, as it is the last and not by any means the worst relic of feudalism, often seems to include the very people who live around them. This is not a matter of law, this present feudalism: it is partly a matter of the necessities of the labour market, and partly one of those sentiments which are almost ineradicable from the English character. The tradition bequeathed to the Fairhoes of Fairhoe was another of these ; but it had been altogether perverted. Instead of holding that the bestowal of a title could in no way increase the personal worth of a good and honest name, it had come to mean that the Fairhoes were so high and mighty and good (which latter was of course a lie), that they were above all title, and beyond the praise of potentates.

So the right hardened into wrong, and the widow of the last representative of Fairhoe, who had herself come of a high family in a neighbouring county, had identified herself with the pride of that favoured race till she was the coldest and most relentless of all those who had bowed down to their own name and worshipped it because of its nakedness.

Of this cold, relentless temper there was ample evidence even as she sat there in the long drawing-room at Fairhoe, looking at her son, who lounged wearily in an easy-chair, and alternately trifled with a book or gazed at the fire, burning low in the great chimney, and only now and then bursting into a fitful flame and lighting the figure of the woman, who watched him with such a concentrated interest in her dominant face. That weaker face of his, with the fair hair clustering over the high white forehead, and the blue eyes peering short-sightedly at the glowing embers, was so evidently under its influence, that it looked quite subdued and childlike before the stern glance of rebuke which lighted her eye, and the haughty self-control which kept her spare form upright, and led her to choose that straight high-backed chair rather than court the easy lounge that stood beside it.

But for the slope on which it stood, the house itself would have been invisible from any great distance amidst the belt of wood which divided the small home farm from the surrounding land on the two sides in the direction of the village; and this apparent seclusion, together with the low and confused style of the building, gave the whole place a singularly dreary look in any but the brightest weather. The contrast of the dull, stone-yellow plaster with the sordid brick and wood work of the larger wing, which fell back as if it had shrunk away from its more pretentious companion, was inexpressibly dreary; and this feeling was increased when the visitor entered the spacious hall where the old, ghostly carvings of mantel and panelling were still preserved, and the ornaments of antlers and dusty or rusted arms still kept their places on the walls, or were disposed on brackets and stands above the varied stones and tiles that formed the floor. A strange, chill, cavernous old ruin of a place was this entrance-hall, and few people would have been prepared for the comfort and luxury which lay beyond it. For in that newer building these had been carefully studied, and even the front room was fitted with modern furniture, and the windows draped with bright colours. It was at the back of the house, however, that the greatest taste had been displayed; and here, from the green and silver hangings to the stained-glass borderings of the upper window-panes and the choice pictures on the wall, the evidences of consummate taste were everywhere manifest. Even the pillars and roofing of the piazza were delicately tinted, and the well-kept lawn and undulating parterre were divided from that other melancholy wing, and from all its sordid surroundings, by a high hedge of evergreen and scented shrubs.

Strangely contrasted with their luxury was one other small quaint room behind the grim old entrance-hall. A hexagon of blackened oak, relieved with a few framed prints and maps, occupied by a large plain bookcase of varnished deal; a writing-table strewed with such volumes as were not heaped in a window, or flung carelessly upon one of two large easy-chairs. A faded green silk blind at the window, outside which a jasmine lashed its long withes mournfully against the panes; and an old chest of walnut-wood drawers, completed the furniture of the place, which the heir of Fairhoe called his "own room." Here he sat and dreamed in the oppressive silence which belongs to houses which are neither farm nor mansion. The whole place was like the family itself, lonely in its pride, and neglected through the want of that distinction which belongs to rank.

The very servants—and they kept a dozen or so—at Fairhoe, were oppressed with the utter monotony of the place, and only the housekeeper, the lady's maid, and the steward, remained; the rest were changed pretty frequently, and blithe, ruddy country girls, who went there fresh to service, sometimes grew quite sad, or were taken home again before their spirits were broken. Those who stayed could only keep themselves merry by such high jinks in that old tumble-down, left-hand wing, that Fairhoe was in a chronic state either of depression or of hilarity, which led to no little scandal and a general warning to half the household.

The village itself was about as quiet a spot as one would wish not to prolong one's stay at. But it had its seasons of merriment too, for there were farmers who had read little and who thought less, but who were keen hands at the gun, and not averse to a little familiar talk now and then at a market dinner at Grundon. Amusements were scarce, of course, and, save for a wandering show now and then, there was little to choose between trap-ball and skittles, or those rural enjoyments which mostly end with daylight unless they are supplemented at the beershop. Fairhoe itself was after all but a mere appanage to Grundon, which was four miles off, and to the latter place the people went to church; there they bought their grocery (those who could afford to lay in a weekly stock), and had their clothes made, and sought all those things which could not readily be obtained at the one general shop, kept by Mrs. Pitcher, "up street," or at the little tailor's at Stump End, or at the butcher's, who killed once a week (on Saturdays), or at the cobbler's cottage in Muddy Lane.

It is extremely doubtful whether the six shops, and the long straggling row of labourers' cottages would have had a name at all but for the vicinity of the house. There was only one street, and that street was Fairhoe. Those of the people who were ardently desirous of going to church, and yet were prevented by infirmities, had nothing for it but to wait till the last Sunday in the month, when a curate came from Grundon, and preached in a damp, whitewashed building—fitted with hard deal benches and a painted reading-desk, and known as "the Chapel of Ease"—which stood at the muddiest end of the place. For the comfort of the inhabitants, however, there was a beetle-browed, low-ceilinged public-house, which slunk away from the roadside at the entrance to the village, as though it hoped to hide its disreputable appearance behind a prominent signboard that swung on a post yards in front of the very horse-trough, and was intended to give a pastoral turn to the thoughts of suspicious wayfarers by the representation of a waggon creaking beneath the weight of accumulated streaks of yellow paint, which an inscription interpreted to mean "The Load of Hay."

CHAPTER II.

"THE LOAD OF HAY."

A LOW, beetle-browed place enough, as has been already observed, and with a desolate look upon it as the rain poured steadily from its overhanging eaves or plashed in the horse-trough before the door.

Not a house where one would look for many customers on such a night, and, to all appearance, the landlord himself expected none, for the red-curtained window of the front room was only just visible by the occasional gleam which shone through it from a scanty fire, in what was by courtesy termed "the parlour"—a distinction accorded to it in virtue of six hard windsor chairs, and a black-framed chimney-glass, which was all the furniture it contained, except three rough deal tables, and as many leaden spittoons upon the sanded floor.

The landlord was, in fact, standing at the door, apparently watching the rain, but with a furtive look in the one eye which was directed towards the road. He evidently expected somebody. The evening was settling down in a dun, hazy veil, which seemed composed of mist and rain, and swallowed everything up like an impalpable sea, as though nature had gone down with all hands. The footsteps of two people coming towards the house were muffled by the fog, and the steam of their breath preceded them like the smoke from a signal as they hove in sight.

They had been running pretty quickly, for they panted as they came up, and waited a moment to get breath.

They were not the visitors the landlord expected, for he only gave them a familiar nod as they reached the doorstep, and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb in the direction of the back of the house.

"All right! There's a good fire inside; you'd better see and dry yourselves," he grumbled, as he made way for them to pass.

"Is Marm Rooke here?" one of them asked, eyeing him askance.

"Yes, yes; an' ever so many more o' your pals. Get in, if you're a-goin'."

There could have been no possible mistake about the people to whom one of these belonged, for gipsy was written in every glance of his bright, beadlike eyes and the twist of the crisp, shiny black locks that fell over his low, narrow forehead. The brown country women, with babies on their backs, their long, straight hair gathered in a gaudy handkerchief, and their full, Jewish-looking, peachy faces, may be quadroons of the tribe; but, once look well at a true "Egyptian," and you will never forget that face, so shifty and yet so defiant. The weird look of the *shallow*, glittering eye; the crimped, snaky locks of shining hair over the small ear, pierced with a gold ring; the hard, wiry frame, and the pomegranate complexion—red earth with the crimson blood shining through. This lad had all these characteristics strongly marked upon him, even to the gold earrings which the men of the tribe also wear; and as he passed in he grinned till his sharp, white teeth flashed in the light of the tallow candle that burnt within the dirty bar.

At the end of the passage they pushed open a rickety door that hung by leather hinges to the wall, and beyond this again another door fastened with a latch and leading to a large apartment, half kitchen half tap-room, furnished only with rough settles and common tables, while the place was lighted with coarse tallow candles set in sockets round a hoop that hung from one of the middle beams in the low, sooty ceiling.

A brisk fire burnt upon the hearth, over which a great iron pot hung by a chain from two upright rods, while one of the long tables was set with some coarse crockery and a few wooden-hafted knives and iron spoons. "The Load of Hay" evidently depended more upon the tap-room than upon the parlour customers, and the former had gathered in force that night.

It was a miscellaneous company, its members not all belonging to the vicious, or, as it is fashionable to call them, the dangerous, classes. There were two or three stolid-looking countrymen there, who minded their own business, and looked upon poaching only as a dangerous calling; there were as many horseylooking individuals, with long leggings and long chins, whose sinister faces were even more repulsive than those of the gipsies themselves, of whom several were lounging about, while one of their number had just begun to tune a fiddle. Lithe, leggy, active fellows were the men, but two of the three women who were present were haggard and battered-looking, as though exposure to the weather had worn out the finer lineaments of their faces, and left them like visages carved in some sort of cross-grained wood. In truth, they were not full children of the tribes; and even the tinker whose kit was set beside the fireplace, though he wore earrings and had crisped hair, was too full in flesh, too stubbly about the chin, and too deep-eyed to pass muster with any true-born Lee who hailed from the eastern counties. The young woman who stood near him was such a contrast to the rest crouching there in the corner by the fire, that but for her dress, and a word or two addressed now and then to her companions, it might have been doubted whether she had any business there at all. She was dark and handsome, and her long black hair was put up in a thick coil under a hood-shaped cap; her figure was full, rounded, and even dignified, but without that wiry strength and sinewy spareness that distinguished the others. Her oval face was dark, with a soft nut-brown tinge, through which the colour sometimes came and went, and her features, which were not masculine, were rendered bold and striking by the full, dark eye, which had nothing shifty in the look with which it met any questioning glance.

The tinker was muttering in a low voice; he had taken some bread and meat from a wallet, and was engaged in cutting off chunks of each alternately with a clasp-knife, so that his mouth was too full for distinct speech. "Why can't you let me into this secret, Marion?" he said. "If it's to spite the man I'm thinking on, I'd be as ready a messenger as them two lads that's just come in, and readier. For there's a grudge atween us that won't be wiped off yet awhiles; not till ——" and to give more emphasis to his words, he stuck his knife into the table, where it stood quivering, with a whirr like the sound of his own grinding-wheel.

"Pooh, Reuben!" said the woman, "if that's what you mean you'd be a pretty messenger to tell secrets to. You haven't come to that at last, have you?—because if I thought ——"

"Thought what?" he said, interrupting her with an oath. "Do you think I meant *using* the knife? No, no. But I'd have him in four whitewashed walls of a prison cell, and keep him in his own ugly company, and set him to work till he heard his blood bubbling in his ears to a tune that never changed and drove him crazy; just as his father did to me for the sake of a tenpenny leveret knocked down with a hedge stake in Fairhoe Woods."

"That's past, Reuben," said the woman, gently, putting her hand upon his shoulder.

"Past, yes; but —— There, don't patter that way; what's it done for me? I might ha' been—God knows what I mightn't ha' been but for that gaol fever that never leaves a lad, and drove me to the tents. Lucky that I'd learnt how to handle tools at the old horseshoe master's at Grundon, or I might ha' died in a ditch. Wish I had sometimes."

"Well, what would ye have done better after all, with the gipsy blood in you; better a tinker with yourself for a master than to blow at the forge for starvation wages. You shall have some sort of revenge, I promise you; but not the way you think of. Nay, you have been revenged already, if you only knew it."

"Yes, I know it, I know it, sister. But to think that we should both be cursed out of house and home for that one harmless throw of a stick. That *I* should have to slink out of prison into the woods, and so go about as though I'd got the brand of that first murderer that we used to read about upon me; and you to go out into the world there and then from your service, because your brother was a gaol-bird."

"What of it?" said the woman, looking steadily into his angry, upturned face; "it made way for *my* gipsy blood, too; and here I am, free as any other market-woman at Grundon; yes, free and trusted, and that's better than such a service as that at Fairhoe, where the shadow that hangs over the house, and the echoes that sound in the side walk, weigh down every heart, however lightsome at first."

"Hah!" said the man, quickly. "You don't mean to say you believe in that, Marion? I don't. I don't believe in it no more than I do that you and me belong to the tribes. Who told you so?"

"Never mind," said she, whispering and touching her finger with her lips, as she stooped lower over the table. "Poor father always said that it was so—ages ago, perhaps; but that the first Rooke that came with the Fairhoes to the Hall was one of the people, or half a one, at all events. Don't contradict it, Reuben,"—she had bent quite down to his ear by this time,—"it serves our turn for these to think so; and they believe it, so I fancy it must be true, for they know the signs when other people can see nothing. They are useful to us, and we are useful to them, too. Let it rest."

"I'm more inclined to think that it's you that have got a sort of spell upon 'em, with all you know of book-learning—more still by the herb-doctorin' and what not, that you got from old Dame Saltash at the big house. They think you can *dree* their drink, or, what's better, that you can dree other people's, Marion; and I believe in myself that even old Nancy Lee would ask your help that way if there was need on't."

Now one of the horsedealers had caught a word or two about Fairhoe and revenge, and had fallen into conversation on his own account, and this ended in an argument with one of the women crouching by the fire, and a flat contradiction of her opinion, which made her flash and sparkle back a vicious glance at her male companion.

"I tell you *we* know better than that," she said, rising slowly, and facing round upon him. "There was blood upon the family before then, and the old man saw the colour of it before he died. It comes to every third Fairhoe sooner or later, and it's on a live hand now. Ask any of our people how the squire come to lay dead in the oak room, and whose hand was ——"

"Have done!" said the woman whom the tinker called Marion; and before the gipsy scold could prevent her, her hand was over her mouth—for one of the keen-eyed lads had made a sign of warning, and at that moment the door was kicked open by somebody outside.

By no other, indeed, than the horseman who had ridden through the rain, and who now stood there in a little pool which grew larger every moment from the stream that poured from his heavy riding coat, the cape of which glistened in the light of the coarse candle that the landlord held behind him.

It was pretty evident that the landlord himself was rather uneasy at his guest's visit to this particular part of the establishment; and, indeed, he had made some attempt to stop him, but it was quite useless. Without pausing for a moment after he had thrown the reins to the stable boy, the wet traveller strode past the parlour and presented himself abruptly at the very moment when his presence might have been taken for an answer to the question put to the company by the gipsy.

One or two of the men sprang to their feet at the entrance of a visitor unannounced, and there were such fierce looks directed to him that he involuntarily made a single step back. Marion Rooke nodded slightly to him, and, as though she knew the purpose of his visit, went over to the door, and they passed out together.

The tinker looked up darkly for a moment, and then stole softly after them.

"Come in here?" said the traveller, pushing open the door of the disused parlour. "I have something to ask that you alone can tell me, or I should not be in this cursed hole on such a night; will you give me the information I want?"

"You sent me a message to Grundon Market, Ralph Fairhoe, and I am here at your request. I don't promise to answer your questions till I hear them."

"You shall hear them, then, and they shall be short; for I must be at Fairhoe to-night, and within an hour or so. *Mistress*, or *Miss*, Marion Rooke, where is Oswald Fairhoe's child?"

"I see Oswald Fairhoe's child before me," said the woman, with a bitter laugh—"worthy son of such a father."

"Curse you! Don't play with me," said the man, in a suppressed voice, and a writhing of his pale face that brought his brows down over those greenish eyes. "I mean my nephew. I hear a few things, and amongst them that there is a brat, born of that milk-faced trollop who has caught his fool's fancy. I know more—that the brat was handed to you, or that you know where it is in hiding, and can tell me whether the girl is wife or ——"

"Hold there," said Marion, with a gesture so quick and fierce that he stopped, half-surprised, half-curious even in the midst of his rage. "If you want news of

Barbara Waine, ask her father, your nephew's steward. If you want to hear of Oswald Fairhoe's heir, ask Oswald Fairhoe, and when you speak to them about her, call her drab and trollop, and you will find that your pale, gentle nephew will feel the murderous blood of your race run in his veins, and the old Calvinist steward will find a tongue for the secret that he has kept so well these twenty years."

That livid face changed from white to blue as he strode towards her, stung to a sort of madness by her taunting words. No greater change could have come upon it, even had he seen the window behind them gently opening from without, until inch by inch a space had grown wide enough to admit the head of a man behind the coarse crimson blind.

He advanced with a sort of calm, desperate fury, and raised his heavy riding-whip, but the woman never stirred.

"No, no; even Ralph Fairhoe won't venture that," she said.

The weapon fell again, though he stood and glared at her, his breath coming and going fast. He was like some wild beast, separated from its prey by iron bars; but the bars were invisible.

"Look to yourself," she said, suddenly springing towards the window. She was only just in time; for at that moment the tinker leaped in, bringing the curtain down with him, and his clasp-knife was open in his hand.

CHAPTER III.

LOOKING BACK.

For the first half hour or so of the comedy the spectators are often a little doubtful of the meaning of much that has been going on upon the stage, but they wait patiently, knowing that the explanation will come and the real business of the piece begin, when two of the characters are seen to draw a couple of chairs down to the front and commence a mutually retrospective conversation; or when (which is more usual) the hero of the drama enters with a true heroic swing, and while he fits on or takes off his gloves, commences by saying, "It is now six years since," &c. Everything is made plain then. The former scene is fitted into the present, as accurately as the top joint of a fishing-rod into the ferule of the second, and the plot goes regularly on to the end.

The same practice is useful even in a plain, unvarnished narrative. In a sensation novel, where the whole interest depends upon the preservation of a mystery in every page, it may be desirable to keep the reader altogether unacquainted with the meaning of the situations into which the characters are introduced. There can be no such reason in a story like the present. The people will fall into their places because neither they nor the author can help it, and it is necessary to look back for a page or so to see how they come there.

In the old parish church at Grundon, besides the great yellow glass window, the light from which fell in a sort of nimbus over the carved oak cupola that overshadowed the pulpit, as though it were the lid which released the preacher, who thereupon sprung up like a jack-in-the-box, the principal object was the carved stone monument to the memory of Oswald Fairhoe, deceased. In his life he had the character of a hard, griping landlord and a stern father, although he subscribed pretty liberally to some of the local charities, of which he was almoner by his office of churchwarden. The report of his covetous greed of gain arose from the fact that his steward was always ready with the receipts for the rent, which were expected to be paid within a week of the quarter-day. The suspicion that he was a stern parent was increased by the report that his eldest son, who would one day be heir of Fairhoe, had chosen to enter the army rather than remain under the paternal roof, where the servants avowed that he quarrelled with his father on the very day of his mother's funeral, and that after high words heard in the library the youth saddled his own horse and rode away, never to return in the old man's lifetime.

The steward, who shared in the hard reputation of the squire, had entered on his duties after this event, but he was connected with it in the public mind, because whenever Oswald Fairhoe met with a debtor who sued for time, or was intercepted by a petitioner seeking charity, or received a note from a tenant asking for a remission of rent, he invariably referred their claims to Silas Waine, his steward, who as invariably shook his head and refused to listen to their requests on the strength of a passage of Scripture.

He was a dark, square-built man, this steward, with a heavy brow and a deliberate manner, by which those about him who were skilful at reading character saw that he covered and subdued the impulses of a strong nature; subdued them so fully, too, that it was impossible to tell whether they were fierce or only fervid, strong in dislike or in the better impulses which should make men generous. The iron in him put out the fire, instead of being heated by it; and he was so habitually harsh and gloomy by reason of this constant self-restraint that few companions held him in any regard, and a good many hated him as heartily as the veriest misanthrope could have desired.

And yet he wronged no man, was never coarse or cruel in his words, and would often in his long, lonely walks, be seen to take a stray child home to the village and restore it to some anxious mother. He was stern to sturdy vagrants who went whining down the country roads, and would threaten them with the stocks and the gaol; but all Fairhoe was surprised one night to hear that he had carried a poor old half-blind woman through a pelting storm from the hedge-side, where she had fainted with fear and hunger, and had walked with her in his arms right into the Red Lion at Grundon, where he had paid for a hot supper and a bed, only waiting to see her revive before he strode home again, regardless of the tempest.

All kinds of reasons were sought and given in explanation of acts so much at variance with the sullen temper and gloomy looks of the man; but the reason for such gleams of kindliness as forced themselves upon the observation of those who disliked him was mostly believed to be the recollection of the wife that he had lost. No one in all that country-side had ever seen her, for Waine had come from a northern county, where, it was said, he had married a sort of second cousin of Oswald Fairhoe, and, having borrowed money from his hard taskmaster which he had failed to repay, had sold himself into that sort of bondage which ended in his stewardship, and brought him far away from the lonely grave in that bleak northern kirkyard, with one little, fair-haired girlie as the link between himself and the past.

If the wife, who had died too soon and yet too late, was like the soft, blue-eyed little creature whom the steward sometimes carried up and down the flower-garden of that little cottage in which he lived, on the home farm, about a quarter of a mile from the squire's house, there could be little wonder that when he gazed upon that sweet tiny face his own stern features would relax from their sad, grim expression, and his bent brows twitch as the tears stood in those cold grey eyes. There was an energy of love about him that few had ever witnessed; but he would sometimes clasp that little one in his great strong arms, as though he would keep her there for ever and could not let her go. Then he would relax his hold, and, with a look of self-reproach, bend his head low and move his lips in secret prayer.

People can generally forgive many vices and any fault in a man of free and friendly speech and jovial manner. Most great swindlers have assumed both, and have only been less successful than those greater swindlers who have exhibited such good-fellowship, tempered by that slight self-depreciation, or rather simulated self-suppression, which is generally mistaken for a symptom of indwelling piety.

The self-suppression of Silas Waine was of a different sort, and there was no jovial companionship in his speech; so men shunned him, and even the squire's hard measures were believed to be reflections of the grim misanthropic humour of his servant. Around that little cottage which he called his home the flowers bloomed, and their fragrance went up into the summer air, but that better incense of opening friendship and regard was wanting. The flowers bloomed and died; the trees upon the orchard wall bore golden fruit, which mellowed in the sun; but not a loving hand came in to cull a posy for the master's sake. None liked him well enough to break through that grim restraint and ask themselves to his table for a dish of the mellow peaches, which might have hung and rotted on the boughs but for the one woman-servant who kept his house, and the little daughter, who soon learnt to go to school at Grundon, with a dinner in her brown holland bag composed of such delicate fare as the stern father would have scorned for his own needs. For her he left the house on long half-holidays, that she might connive with the servant-woman to entertain one or two of her chosen playmates. He would be about the fields all day, perhaps within earshot, and would watch the little ones homeward across the stiles to the town; but he would not show himself to interpose his gloomy face and stern look between them and their childish mirth. The best of all that orchard and the gayest blooms in that well-kept garden were for her; and for her delight and happiness that rugged, stricken heart of his yielded its one soft rill of living water.

Blundell Fairhoe, who had become entitled to a small sum of money on his mother's death, had never entered the door of the old house after that last disagreement with his father. And yet it was not a furious quarrel: it was a cold, formal, mutual abstinence from familiar intercourse; and, after the lapse of a year, an occasional letter passed between the old squire and Belfast, where his son was quartered with his regiment. For when he came into his little property Blundell lost no time in entering the service in which he had often, but unsuccessfully, solicited his father to buy him a commission. The world was his oyster, and he had laid out a good part of his little fortune in the purchase of the sword with which he intended to open it, and he had succeeded indifferently well, although up to the time of his marriage he had seen no active service beyond that of assisting in investing the streets of the town during the Irish troubles. For he had never been employed on foreign service, and the Peace of Amiens still left him time and opportunity to push his fortune in another direction. He had gained more than one step in rank since his regiment was first ordered to Ireland; and, having made good use of a short leave to visit his friends by spending a fortnight at Sir Henry Bullpoint's seat in Norfolk, contrived to become the husband of Helena Bullpoint, with a dowry of a couple of thousand pounds and a pedigree nearly as important as that of Fairhoe itself. His father was present at the wedding; for, although half the county knew by hearsay that between father and son a barrier had been set up, and that they never met under the family rooftree, the barrier was not so high but that either could see over it. Old Oswald Fairhoe was not the man to undervalue his son's politic marriage, and he so far respected Blundell for having the tact and ability to look after his own fortune without troubling him, that the meeting of the two had a sort of icy cordiality about it peculiarly edifying to those who had been on the watch for a scowl. Nay, more, the old man had already been in communication with his old schoolfellow, Sir Henry Bullpoint, and it was tacitly understood that the Fairhoe estate would not go out of the proper line of succession. Thus father and son met like polite worldly warriors who had had their bout and parted. They regarded each other with a curious sort of respect, of which that of the older man for the younger rather predominated, since the younger had made the best swordplay, and now appeared as a cool, calculating gentleman, with that sort of military bearing that has in it no trace of swagger, or, indeed, of mere *muscularity*, but is collected, self-contained, polished, worldly, and cynical. There was one other member of the family who was not at the wedding—to wit, Ralph Fairhoe, the old squire's younger son, and with a stronger likeness to his father than to Blundell. Ralph Fairhoe cared very little about his brother, and, in fact, resented his marriage as an act which seriously diminished his own chance of an adequate provision.

It may be doubted whether the old squire had not at heart a greater liking for Blundell than he ever could be brought to entertain for his younger son; for Blundell had quarrelled and had gone to carve out a way for himself in the world, but Ralph quarrelled and stayed, apparently without the remotest intention of leaving the house "for good," while he could lounge about Grundon or go out badger-baiting or shooting with some of the most questionable company in the county.

To do the old man justice, he had made some effort to induce his son to undertake the management of part of the estate, and had borne, not without a hard struggle, the frequent misappropriation of money, until the very night of his eldest son's marriage, when he returned to find a choice assemblage of horsedealers and tavern roysterers occupying the long drawing-room, sprawling on the damask couches and sitting, jockey-fashion, on the carved high-backed chairs, while the bottles on the table showed that the housekeeper had parted with the key of the wine-cellar; and about a gallon of reeking punch smoked in the ancient china bowl which had been among the choicest heirlooms of Fairhoe.

The old man heard the coarse laughter and brutal jests of the men as he approached the house, for it was a warm evening and some of the windows stood open to let out the tobacco smoke which almost filled the room. He was about to turn into the path leading round to the dwarf shrubbery when he saw Rooke the under gardener coming from the toolhouse.

"What is all this about?" he asked, pointing to the house.

"It's some of Master Ralph's friends, I b'lieve, squire," replied the man. "I don't rightly know who 'tis that's come; but I wouldn't go in, sir, if I wur you. He seem to be not quite right in 's head, I think, Master Ralph do. I'd leave un to go away, if I might be so bold as say so, sir, and not go in."

The man, who was a bold, outspoken fellow enough, had instinctively seen some danger in his master entering amidst that drunken crew at such a moment; for, in fact, he had just carried up a kettle of hot water, the old housekeeper, from whom Ralph had forced the keys of the cellar, being too much alarmed to go herself or to permit any of the women-servants to remain in sight. He had seen that, though Ralph himself was sober enough, and sitting at the table with a sort of quiet, mocking devilry in his face, laughing at the vagaries of his companions, he was in a humour for any desperate resistance to authority. Even at that moment one of the fellows, who was not too drunk to stand upon a chair, was engaged in corking the face of Oswald Fairhoe's portrait, which hung upon the wall, and was encouraged thereto by the "young master."

It may not be matter for surprise that the old man, with his own cold, truculent, suspicious temper, should resent the advice proffered by the under gardener, who himself knew the squire so well that he had spoken with an uneasy fear of the consequences. Oswald Fairhoe disliked and suspected him from that moment. In a month his place was filled by another gardener; and though, after his death, old Dame Saltash, the housekeeper, took his little girl Marion to be still-room maid, it may be doubted whether poor Reuben Rooke, her brother, did not owe to that warning of his father the imprisonment with which he was punished for killing a hare on Fairhoe-road years afterwards.

When Oswald Fairhoe entered the room and saw the riot and confusion which was desecrating it, his cold nature was roused to an access of sudden fury, which was all the more terrible that he tried at first to restrain it. As he stood there, glaring at the scene before him, and tugging at his neckcloth to relieve the choking of his passion, his son rose, with a mocking laugh.

"You see, sir," he said, "you have been keeping it up abroad, and I'm keeping it up at home: every man to his humour. This is my friend, Harry Jershaw; he will be very happy to make your acquaintance in the flesh, as he has already in the canvas."

The individual referred to was he who had been engaged in defacing the portrait, to which he had just put the final touch. On seeing who had come in, he jumped down from the chair with an oath, and, catching the insolence of his host, made a low bow to the old man.

Oswald Fairhoe raised his bamboo walking-cane and brought it down with such force upon the head of Mr. Jershaw as he stooped before him that that gentleman fell senseless on the floor. The rest of the company were cowed before such prompt measures, and rose as if to go.

"Stop!" shouted Ralph; "don't go till I tell you. Is this the way you treat my friends?" he said, turning to his father. "If you've anything to say, say it to me, and alone."

"Give me the keys of the cellar," said the old man, still gasping with rage and approaching his son, "and get rid of these blackguards."

"Don't call names," retorted the other; "and, as for the keys, here they are," and he tossed the heavy bunch of keys out into the passage, whence they went clanging into the hall below.

The father could restrain himself no longer, he gave a great cry, and, with his upraised stick, strode towards the younger man, who lifted a chair to ward off the blow. "Don't strike," he said, calmly, but with a wicked look in his eyes; "don't strike, or I shall do you a mischief, though you are my father."

"You're no son of mine," gasped the squire, "though you were born of my wife near thirty years ago; from this time you are nothing to me, and so——"

He would have rushed at him wildly, but his arm was seized behind in a powerful grasp, while, almost at the same moment, the chair was torn from the hands of the younger man and dashed against the wall.

"Cursed be he who lifteth his hand against his father or his mother!" said a deep voice; and a strong, square-built man came between the combatants and looked Ralph full in the face.

"Who the devil are you?" said the latter, a little bewildered.

"I am a new servant, hired a week ago, and my name is Silas Waine."

"Waine, Waine! You have no business here," said the squire. "Who sent you up-stairs?"

"I could find nobody to ask where I was to wait for you, except the housekeeper, and as she talked to me we heard you cry out, and I came, fearing mischief. I fear it still."

The guests had begun to slink out one by one, but half a dozen of them lingered. "I've half a mind to whip you for a meddling hound," said Ralph to the new comer. "How dare you interfere, you infernal scoundrel; get out of the room."

Waine never budged. "You are not my master," he said, quietly; "and I have no fear of three such men as you."

"Make him go, curse him, make him go," said the other, turning to his father; "you have taken up with a fine protector, truly."

"Stay here, Waine," said the old man, in such a changed voice that it was evident that that fearful outburst of passion had shaken him, as lightning quivers the tree that it has not riven, and leaves it weakened for ever more. "Stay here—and go you," he added, with a flickering revival of energy, pointing to those who still remained about the door. "Go you with them, if you will," he said, turning once more to his son, "and never let me see your face again."

"Give me my own, then," retorted Ralph, who had poured out a great glass of brandy and swallowed it; "give me the pocket-money that you have cheated me out of these twenty years that you might keep me hanging about this damned rotten hole; give me a tenth part of it—even a twentieth. Come," he added, with a harsh laugh, "put down a hundred pounds, and I'll turn my back upon the place to-night, and not come here again till you are in a better humour."

"Waine, take this key, go into the room below this, open the closet by the fireplace, and bring up a box that you'll see on the shelf," said the squire, hoarsely. Waine went out and came back presently with a small box of japanned mteal. This the old man opened with a smaller key, and, taking out a bundle of notes, laid them on the table. "There are the hundred pounds," he said, grimly, "keep to your bargain, as I can assure you I shall keep you to it."

"You mean it, then," said Ralph, touching the notes, but not yet taking them up. He was cowed evidently. "Do you mean really to carry it to this?" he said, a little more gently.

"It's *your* bargain," said the old man, "and I mean it as surely as I mean that, if you did not bear my name, I would slay you where you stand. Go!"

"Well, then, good-by, and may ——"

"Cursed be he who ——" began Waine, in the same voice as before.

"Curse *you*, at any rate," said Ralph, with a malicious look; "and, look ye, I shall be back again yet. Blood is thicker than water, and our blood is no puddle. You'll be sorry for this, old gentleman, before I've spent more than half the money; for I shall make this take root and grow. There are brainless fools enough to make it a sure venture;" and he went out, with an air of assumed carelessness, amidst his companions.

"Bolt the door after them, and come to me in my room," said the old man, as the sound of their footsteps died upon the path. "You will have to begin business to-morrow early."

This was the initiation of the new steward; and the next day Oswald Fairhoe went abroad erect, and cold, and stern; but those who knew him said that he was beginning to break very fast, and that it was a pity he had turned both his sons out of doors.

Three or four years glided away, and there was little external change to be noted either in Fairhoe or its master day by day, and yet both were wearing slowly but surely. Ralph had never been admitted to his father's presence; and when he had once forced his way into that business-room where he sat of mornings, the old man rang the bell and would hold no talk with him, even though he swore that he had not come for money. Where, or how, he lived, in the intervals of his visits, no one there knew. Twice he had come well dressed and on horseback; once with shabby clothes and a wild, scared look. It was on this occasion that he sought Silas Waine's cottage, where the steward was sitting, with his little daughter on his knee.

When Ralph entered Waine called the woman from the kitchen, and, thrusting the child into her arms, bade her take her away. It was as though he dreaded the effect of the evil eye upon his treasure; and his usually grim, set face was troubled.

His visitor came in with a smile that was half a sneer; but he wanted tidings of his father. Could he see him? Would Waine take him in, and wait there with him even, that he might speak a word or two?

The steward's orders were peremptory in that respect, but he pitied the man, depraved as he was, and asked him whether he had lost his money. Ralph smiled bitterly as he shook his hand over the table with a peculiar turn of the wrist, by which he intended to indicate the way which the hundred pound had gone. Waine scarcely understood him, and could do nothing between him and his father; but he lent him five pounds of his own, and saw no more of him for a year.

In the summer of that year Oswald Fairhoe lay sick and solitary in a chamber beyond the long drawing-room. It was an old oak-panelled apartment, which could be reached by a door at the top of three steps at the end of a short passage, leading to a little closet or dressing-room, screened from the room itself by a heavy curtain; another door led into the main corridor of the house: just such a room, in fact, as might have been expected in such a place, with its heavy panelling lighted by a window with thick frames, which threw black bars of shadow upon the hangings of the great bed.

The old man had caught a chill at the Sessions House one wet morning, and the doctor, who came from Grundon, had prescribed rest and some herb-tea, for which old Dame Saltash, the housekeeper, was famous. Nothing more was wanted, he said, than this simple remedy and a fire in the bed-room.

CHAPTER IV.

THE END OF THE RETROSPECT.

YES, old Oswald Fairhoe lay sick and solitary in that dreamy, half-waking doze which is too feverish for rest and too vague for reason. The smouldering fire in the old, high-shouldered basket-grate, which had been placed on the wide hearth, threw a red ripple of light upon the knobs and carvings of the bedstead, and glowed so deeply in the black-oak panelling opposite that it seemed as though the core of the heat lay there and the fire itself was but a reflection from it.

Strange shadows crept along the walls and deepened as they changed, for it was just the time in the early evening when there comes that hush and lull which precedes the dying of the day into twilight. The weather was close and sultry; the later crops, already ripe for the sickle, standing in distant fields, were unruffled by a passing breath of wind; the scent of herbs and flowers was overborne by the warm mist which crept from the low-lying bed of the stream, whose wavelets moved slowly, and lapped like molten lead. There was a dead pause in the air, as though some strange event were about to happen and all things waited for it.

Silas Waine had come home to his cottage after a heavy day's walking, for he had been out collecting, and, beside that, had called at Grundon to execute several commissions for the squire, whose sudden illness had occurred at an awkward time, just as the quarterly bills became due; for the old man was as punctual about paying his own debts as he was rigid in exacting payment from his debtors, and he took discount—or, rather, Waine took it for him; and that was another reason for the unfavourable opinion entertained of the steward.

A message had been sent from the house an hour before to say that the squire wanted to see him as soon as he came in, and that he must go up directly. He knew what the business was, for which he had been summoned. The debts which Oswald Fairhoe inherited had not all been paid off, and an instalment upon one of them was due on the following day. On the very afternoon that he had been taken ill the old man had been himself to the bank at Grundon, and received £400, for the purpose of settling this claim; for it was one of his peculiarities to pay these instalments himself, and always in money. Now he was too ill to leave home, and the business must be intrusted to the steward; so Silas changed his heavy boots for a pair of lighter shoes, washed his face and hands, and, after a hasty meal, went up to the house.

Amidst that sleepy hush, and while the shadows were chasing each other over the smooth lawn, and appearing to settle down in the dim old hall, where they hung about the staircase, Ralph Fairhoe, approached the house. The women servants were most of them engaged at their tea; the one man-of-all-work was fanning himself with his cap, leaning against the garden-wall, and watching the blackbirds, whose yellow bills were making havoc amongst the ripe fruit. Only one maid-servant was about the house, and she had come to the door to shake a duster which she had been using in the dining-room; she left the door open while she went back to fetch a broom, and in that moment Ralph Fairhoe, who had been round the terrace and found the French windows fastened, passed in and was hidden in the darkness that had almost swallowed up the staircase.

He had no settled purpose in entering so secretly, except that he believed his father would forbid his seeing him, and so he would give him no notice of his presence. Should he find him inaccessible to his entreaties or his threats—for his circumstances were desperate enough to demand either—he would take up his position in the house again and defy anyone to remove him. He must have money, if possible; and, if no money could be obtained, he would at least be out of the way there, and secure of food and shelter. He expected to find the old man in the long drawing-room, which lay at the top of the stairs, and was a great, gaunt-looking apartment, stretching nearly across the front of the house, and with the ceiling lower at one end than at the other, the older and lower end being traversed by a great carved beam and lighted by a side window, deeply embayed and still retaining the thick panes and heavy, wide oaken frames which had always belonged to it. After pausing for a moment to assume the air and expression necessary for his plan, the son opened the door and strode in. Everything lay in a dim, deepening twilight, for the blinds were down and the evening had begun to settle; the whole place looked so ghostly that even he felt its influence, and the confident bearing and threatening aspect which he had assumed fell away from him as he stepped back into the doorway. The place seemed full of nodding, hearselike plumes, and funeral weepers—he thought for a moment that his father lay there dead, and that the awful hush in the air was that solemn stillness which comes upon the house where the last silent visitor has been.

He recovered presently, upon noticing that everything wore its accustomed look; and, stealing from the room by the further door, stood upon the short flight of stairs leading to the oak bed-room, listening. Thence he went softly into the little dressing-room, and, crouching behind the curtain that shrouded it from the larger chamber, heard the clicking of the ashes in the grate and the hard breathing of the man who lay within. Gently as he moved the curtain, he was afraid to disturb the invalid, and paused again before he went in on tiptoe. His father lay with his face away from the side of the room where he had entered, and, though he stirred uneasily and seemed to mutter in his sleep, made no sign of consciousness. What was he to do? A hasty glance round the room showed him that no one had been there for some time, for the fire was waning for want of fuel, and the candle had not been lighted. At that moment the crumbling ashes fell in, and a flickering blaze lighted up the bed and its surroundings. On a small table near the side on which he stood was a square writing-desk with a bunch of keys hanging from its lock. Before the flame had died out he had turned the key, and opened the desk in eager haste. A moment's fumbling with a small brass hasp and the inner lid was raised, disclosing a canvas bag carefully tied with twine. His hand trembled as he grasped it, and he let the lid fall with a sound slight enough but sufficient to wake the sleeper, who turned round at once, and, gasping for breath, heaved himself up in the bed. With a hoarse, unearthly cry, the old man clutched at a bell-rope above his head, at the same time struggling to get out of bed; but, with all his evil impulse full upon him, his son seized him by the arm, and, with the other hand upon his throat, forced him back upon the pillow. The flame flickered into a dull yellow glare before it went out for ever; and then the last shadow moved to its appointed place, and the room was darkened. In that one moment Silas Waine had seen who was there, for the steward had come up the staircase and entered by the main corridor.

He sprang forward in pursuit of the fugitive, but paused before he reached the outer door. Then, he stood for a moment irresolute, and, going silently back, lighted a taper which stood on the mantel, put the papers into the desk again, and set it on the table.

The bag of money, which he knew had awaited his coming, was no longer there.

He was roused from the half stupor into which he had fallen at this discovery by hearing the old man moan, and, after replacing him in the bed and adjusting the pillows, went down quickly to summon the housekeeper. No one had seen Ralph Fairhoe go out, and, as far as the steward could surmise, none had known of his presence there; but Silas Waine asked no questions until he could decide with his own conscience what course he should adopt. A horse was saddled, and a man sent off at a gallop to Grundon to fetch the doctor, who was out, but followed almost at the heels of the messenger. The squire had never ceased to moan and move his head to and fro upon the pillow, and directly the doctor saw him he told Waine to write at once to "the family," for that Oswald Fairhoe had only a few hours to live.

It was midnight before Silas left the hall, and as he strode home through the mist of that hot autumn night he felt as though the air and sky closed round him—a visible but impalpable prison, wherein he was doomed to that terrible revolution of thought which finds no sequel, but, commencing again and again with the same inquiry, loses the clue, and lapses into mere confused dreaming. What should he do? What was his duty? Should he at once denounce the man who had at least hastened, if he had not caused, the death of his own father, and who had robbed Fairhoe? If he let him go free, would not his own conscience he burdened with a portion of the crime? Or should he not be bound as a faithful servant of the house, to spare the living and the dead the undying shame and degradation that would come upon it by one of its members being placed in a felon's dock? Which should be first, public right or private duty? He walked and thought till he was almost exhausted, and then he did what many men of his constitution and creed have done. He went home, and taking down a small square, squat-shaped Bible, opened it at random, and sought direction in the text that first met his eye. Even the sacred Scriptures, however, cannot be used as oracles in this way.

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do do it with thy might." He interpreted it, not without misgiving, to mean that he was to do his duty as a servant; and he wrote to Ralph Fairhoe telling him of his father's approaching death, and, in so doing, made no mention of the secret, though he knew that the other had both seen and recognised him.

Oswald Fairhoe lived more than a few hours: he lingered for days, but he might have been dead for any sign of recognition he gave to those around him. The sun rose, and bright bars of light struggled with the reflection of the fire in those old oaken panels; the nights came and went, time being measured by the rushlight that burnt in the tin shade, and flickered dimly till it was put out by the pale grey of the morning; a hired nurse from the poor-house at Grundon took a turn at watching when Mrs. Saltash could keep awake no longer, and all the time the sick man was fed by spoonfuls, and either lay in a stupor or began to moan again with an unceasing repetition that made the flesh of the watchers creep, and reminded them, somehow, of that strange whisper and rustle that had been heard in days gone by in the long gravel walk of the shrubbery, where it was said the unquiet spirit of a former Fairhoe kept a vigil on a certain night each year.

Before the letter which reached Blundell Fairhoe at Belfast could be answered by him in person the old man was dead. Only in the last moments had he shown any signs of returning consciousness, and then he had stretched out his hand towards the desk that still stood on the table by his bedside, and had called for Silas Waine. The steward was there, and, when he heard his name, came forward and took his master's hand.

"Has Blundell come?" gasped the old man. "See that you lock the rooms, and you yourself keep the keys, and stay here—after—you know. I say—you know."

Silas bowed his head, and the cloud upon his dark face deepened. "You can understand me, sir," he said, in a distinct tone, but too low to be heard by the nurse and the maid who were in attendance. "Is it your will that I keep silence, or that I say what has become of the money that was in that desk?"

The stone-blue, filmy eyes stared at him, a tremor passed across the sharpening features of the dying man, but not a word came in response before the light went out altogether, and only the clay lamp was left.

The steward locked and sealed the drawers and such doors as he thought it necessary to secure, walking through the lonely rooms like one in a trance; then he went out on to the terrace, and so, down the flight of steps, into the garden and towards the shrubbery. He walked with his head bowed down and with his hand in his pocket clutching the keys. The reaction of long watching and of a great mental conflict was upon him, so that he seemed to walk in his sleep, and took no heed where he went. The cool wind of the late autumn was rustling the dried leaves; and the strange, dead, woody odour which belongs to the evening of that time of the year seemed, somehow, appropriate to his train of thought. That may have been the subtle cause of his going swiftly towards the shrubbery, but he himself neither knew nor speculated upon the reason of his turning in that direction. He strode along, crushing the crisp red leaves under his heavy tread, and holding his broad hat in his hand, that the air might blow about his face, until he reached the end of the wood, where a low fence divided it from a smooth velvety slope overlooking the open country. The sun was going down in a crimson glare, over which the dark slaty clouds were closing. It looked like the glow of lava from some nearly-spent volcano shining in lurid glory through a mighty chasm. On the left of the pathway through which he had come stood a great chestnut-tree through which the wind that had just sprung up sighed wearily. As he stood leaning on the fence and looking across the fields, a man came out from the shadow of this tree and touched him on the shoulder. Silas Waine was less easily startled than most men, but, like all those who hold a stern and gloomy creed, he was susceptible to superstitious influences. He had never acknowledged a belief in those supernatural stories which had been whispered about Fairhoe in connection with the ghostly footsteps, but he had fancied once or twice that night that he heard the sounds of a light tread, now on this side, now on that, following him as he went along the path. The shadow of the supernatural which lay behind his more prominent beliefs was stirred, and when he felt the hand upon his arm he started round with a gesture almost menacing. It was Ralph Fairhoe who stood before him, but the steward's look was so threatening that he stepped back hastily before he recovered himself and returned that dark look with a stare of assumed indifference.

"What brings you here, of all places in the world, to-night, and why are you not at the house?" said Waine, from between his clenched teeth. "Your work there is finished, and I don't wonder that even you could not look on it."

"What do you mean?" retorted Ralph, "what work? Whatever work there has been there lately is of your own doing, master steward. I have just come from London, where I have been these six months."

"You lie!" said Silas, striding towards him, "you know you lie, and, what is more, that I know it, thief and murderer that you are. Go your way, and let me go mine, for as the Lord liveth, I may be tempted to take the vengeance that belongs to him into my feeble hands. Come to the funeral of your father, an you will; but, for to-night, don't cross my path, as there is some evil power in me that I have hard work to keep down."

"You are raving, man!" said Ralph, drawing back, nevertheless, but holding up his hand in warning. "If what I hear be true, you are in more danger than I am. My father sends for you to see him, and is found afterwards speechless and dying. None but you and the doctor there that night, and yet his desk standing at the bedside, with the keys in it, and no money there. Look to yourself, I say, before you bandy words with me!"

Silas stood rigid as a statue carved in stone, his temples throbbing and his eyes glaring, as though they reflected the last red streak of light just smouldering in a crevice of the sky. With a great cry, he sprang forward and caught Ralph Fairhoe by the cape of his riding-coat, from which he slid his strong sinewy hand upward to his breast, and grasping him by the neckcloth, shook him as a dog would shake a rat.

"Unsay what you've said," he gasped; "or——"

The neckcloth gave way, and came off in his hand. Ralph sprang backward to the trees.

"Give me the keys, then," he said; "for you have them I know; and let us keep our secret." He was cowed and breathless.

Silas gave no answer, but stamped his foot upon the ground.

"Another minute," he said, hoarsely, "and it will be too late. I tell you, man, that I have but just prayed by your father's dying bed, and that he knew me only, though others were there. I prayed for him and for myself; but you have raised a devil in me that is stronger than I; go—go—go!" and he covered his eyes with his heavy hand.

Ralph began to think that he had better compromise. "Come, come, give me the keys then," he said; "and I unsay it all again. Things look strange; but we neither of us suspect the other. We're both in the same boat."

Out came that heavy right hand with a blow that had it struck the white, mocking face that spoke so near would have dyed it crimson. With a terrible oath, the steward rushed forward again, and seeing that his antagonist had turned ran wildly after him.

Through the thickly strewn leaves, ankle deep; ankle deep, too, in the muddy ponds formed by the autumn rains, over slippery undergrowths and mosses, forcing their way through hollows, where withes and weeds grew breast high, and where rabbits squealed as they scuttled, frightened, away. At last out into the path again, and now quite close to the hedge that separated the wood itself from the ground adjoining the house.

Here Ralph Fairhoe caught his foot against a gnarled root, and fell heavily forward. Silas was upon him before he could check his headlong speed, and half-blinded, torn, and bleeding, both men rolled upon the ground together.

The steward's grasp settled first, and he rose to his knee.

"What would you have me do? You don't mean to murder me, I suppose," panted Ralph.

The other loosed his hold, and rose, "No," he said, turning away; "once more do not tempt me, but go; and when Blundell Fairhoe comes to claim his own, do you come, too."

As he spoke he leaned against the tree where they had both fallen, with his eyes upon the ground, unmindful of the muttered curses and the sudden gesture with which his antagonist turned upon him before leaping the hedge. But at that moment he heard the footsteps again close behind him, and turning at the sound saw a girl coming through the trees.

"Who is that, and what do you here?" he said, sternly, for his fear as well as his fury had gone out of him now that his blood was coursing through his veins after that long chase.

"I am here to see you, Master Waine," said she, coming into the path. "You know me—Marion Rooke."

"It is not well to see a young girl out here after nightfall; why didn't you go to my house, Marion?" he said, more gently.

"I went there and followed you here, for I had a message to give you, but I was too late all ways."

"You should have waited."

"Look ye here, Master Waine. I mind how you took my poor brother in, after he came out of prison, till he could shift for himself, and bid him sleep in your shed, and fed and tended him. I mind, too, how you let me come and go, and look at the bright little face that's asleep in your cottage to-night, and how, when I left the big house there, because of Reuben's shame, you gave me the good word that has helped me to be in the market at Grundon, with old Dame Tress. I have waited long to do you a service, and to-day I thought the time had come. That—that murderous coward has been at Grundon to-day, asking everywhere about his father's matters, and how he died, and whether Blundell Fairhoe is here, and what money the old man left. He has been at the bank, too, and folks there think that he will be master till his brother comes."

"What is that to you, girl?"

"I knew he would seek you, and came to give you warning; but I was too late. Look here! I was by when you saw him down at the fence, yonder, and heard his talk; and I know one who saw him come out of the house *that* night."

"Girl, girl! be careful what you say," cried Silas, with a great gasp.

"Some of the gipsy folk were down by Fairhoe village that day, and one of the women had come up to the house to tell the maids their fortunes."

"You are too much inclined to those gipsy jades," said Silas, bitterly. "They are an ungodly and pagan race; but go on."

"I have heard my father say that he had some of their blood in him, and, whether or not, they claim me; but I'm not one of them, except that they tell me things and come to ask me this or that of herb physic and the like, odd times. I don't hold with 'em."

"Heaven forbid, Marion! But go on."

"The woman that I told you of—Thyrza Lee—she come up to the house and see the door open, and then she huddle down to watch whether anybody come for a minute, and was creepin' up to the porch with her eyes all round, when she sees a man coming up the path. She know'd the look of him well enough, for few of the people in this part that hasn't had cause to know his face, and if curses killed, he'd be dead to-night. A'most before she'd time to huddle down again he was in at the open door, and she'd ha' followed, but the maid come back upon the step. Then she goes up and wants to tell the girl's fortune, and all the time she talk, she spy here and there to see into the hall, and so sent the maid in laughing with her chatter, after she'd heard that the old squire lay ill abed, with nobody to tend him. A'most before she could get back into the road again you come by, and she set down under the fence facin' the main road, where a man, or leastwise a boy, come up from the meadow, and she give him a sign, and they kept watch together. That boy was my brother Reuben, and 'twas well for Ralph Fairhoe that it was none of the people; for he come out presently, all wild and flustered like; and when he gets into the road, where there was a bit o' daylight left, he takes something from his breast, and looks at it in his hand. If he'd but known what hungry eyes and hungry ears watched and listened to the shine and the chink of it he'd have gone faster to Grundon, though as it was he went fast enough, for his horse was with a boy at the gate of the paddock beyond the farm. Well for him, I say, that 'twas Reuben; if 't had been some I know of, the money would have changed owners; but Reuben stood proof against Thyrza Lee's hard words, and kept his cudgel in his fist, out of her reach. As 'twas, she was back at Fairhoe, and sent two more that I know after him, and they even heard the sound of his horse's hoofs as they tracked him into the stable-yard of the White Horse at Grundon; but he was away again by the night coach before they could come to any plan, and all they got for their trouble was the empty bag, and here it is."

She held out a brown canvas bag as she spoke, but Silas shrank back from it; his wits seemed to be sharpened by the words of suspicion which had been thrown upon him.

"Girl, girl," he said, "take it back to 'em; you know not what you do. Do you know that inside that bag is stamped the name of the bank where the squire kept his money?"

"Ay, that do I; and you don't think, Master Waine, that they sharp-eyed gipsies took it away with 'em. They was standing at the door when they see the landlord of the White Horse go into the parlour, and caught sight of Ralph Fairhoe with a pocket-book in his hand. He'd been changing the gold for bank-notes, and just as the landlord come out again, one of these men hears the coach coming, and run in to say so, the other waiting outside. Right into the parlour he went, and startled my gentleman as he was putting up his pocket-book; so that he got on his hat and cloak and went out, leaving this bag behind upon the floor, where it had dropped off the table. The man that went in would ha' helped him on with his coat, but the landlord was there to do that; the man that was outside hustled against him as he went out, and felt all the pockets he could find; but the money was in his breast.

"How did you come by that bag, girl?" said Waine, uneasily.

"Why, the landlord asked the man that went into the parlour what business he had there, and the man, instead of answering, told him that the gentleman had dropped something under the table. Then the landlord picked it up, and said that he was all a gentleman, and had hired a horse there that same day, and had rode pretty hard, too; but told the man to get out of that into the tap; and the man asked him if he knew who the gentleman was, and, as he didn't know, he told him that it was Master Ralph Fairhoe; and so his knowing that was some pretence for him going into the parlour to tell that the coach was ready. All this I heard yesterday; and yesterday Master Stunyard, the landlord, himself brought this bag to the market full of copper and silver to pay my old dame for the butter and fruit she'd sold him."

"Take it back to him, Marion, and keep him minded how you came by it."

"It will go back to-morrow. Is there aught I can do for you, Master Waine? I've left a paper of sweeties for missy, God bless her!"

"Amen," said Silas, solemnly raising his hat; "though you spoke lightly and not in prayer, Marion, I say, Amen! I would that you would think more of serious things, girl, and go no more with the gipsies; they are ill company for honest folk."

"And yet they have for once told what 'twas worth while to know."

"True; but they have done it for no love they bear either truth or justice, and 'twould be hard to make them into acceptable witnesses. Marion, I charge you to tell no one of this; let it rest. Promise me."

"I promise not to tell it till you bid me tell it to some purpose."

"That's well, girl. You have said; and remember that our nay should be nay, and our yea, yea; so that your solemn promise is an oath. Good-night; and if you choose to call in on your way and have some supper with Barbara, tell her that I shall be home soon. I am going back again."

When he got back to the house the hall door was open, and a strange man servant in undress livery was hauling in a couple of great portmanteaus. Presently Dame Saltash came down the stairs quite flustered.

"Oh! Mr. Waine," she said, "I'm glad you're here. Mr. Blundell has arrived, and he's inquiring for you. Just been up to see the poor dear above, we have, and now he's in the drawing-room.'

Silas went up at once, and, after knocking at the drawing-room door, found himself in the presence of a man very little younger than himself, but so well preserved and with such a slim, genteel figure, and so cool and self-possessed a manner that he appeared like a mere youth beside the grim steward. There was a compact look about his dress, and he presented altogether a highly-washed and cleanly-brushed appearance, which bespoke the military officer of that day. For the rest, there was a smile upon his mouth, combined with a calm furtive look in his cold blue eye, that betrayed more than mere caution. Both smile and look belonged to the polished gentleman, who began with suspicion and ended with caution in his intercourse with the rest of the world. Such rare flashes as appeared either in eye or face sometimes, were like the cold, hard glitter from a steel blade that seldom left the scabbard.

Waine gave him the keys, and they went through the house together; but he looked at nothing that night except at the desk which had been brought down into the late squire's business room. In this he found the bank pass-book, and, turning to the last page, made a hasty summary of the account.

"What day do you say my father was taken ill?" he asked presently, looking up with a keen glance at the steward. Waine had already told him the particulars of the old man's illness, and had confirmed or corrected what he had already learned of the cause of Ralph Fairhoe's absence from the house.

"On the Tuesday of the week before last," replied Waine. "He never spoke to me after that till the day of his death, and then I met him coming from Grundon."

"I see he had drawn a large amount of money out of the bank that very day. Do you know what he did with it? Did he say anything to you at the last? I hear from the housekeeper that he handed you the keys, and that you—in fact, that you took the place of the clergyman on that occasion."

"I took no man's place, sir," replied the steward, as his brow darkened. "He was at the last when I asked him if I should pray with him."

"No offence, Mr. Waine; I meant none, I assure you. He said nothing about the money, then?"

"Not a word to me. Maybe he intended to pay off part of the mortgage with it, and he always saw to that himself. I never had anything to do with such business."

"We must look to-morrow if it is in the house. He would scarcely have sent anyone to pay it before you saw him, and that was the next day, I think?"

"Yes. I saw him the next evening; he sent for me."

"And what was the business he wanted you to do?"

"He never told me. When I reached his room he was speechless, and almost insensible."

"Waine—has my brother Ralph ever been here without you knowing it since that unfortunate affair—during my father's illness, for instance?"

"It is quite likely. I was seldom here unless the squire sent for me. Hasn't Master Ralph been here to-night?"

"No. I've heard nothing of the sort. Why? Did you expect him?"

"I wrote to him, to say that his father was dead, at the same time that I wrote to you."

"Yes; I know it. He was in Dublin then, and the letter was sent out to him from London. I heard of him at the gaming-table, and he seemed flush of money. He must be here to the funeral; and then I hope, in my soul, that he may never darken the doors again." This was said in a suppressed voice; but the steely glitter of the eyes told how deep was its meaning. "However—good-night, Waine; we will go into these matters more in detail to-morrow. Come round to breakfast, at half-past eight."

The steward had never been treated with that kind of gentlemanly consideration before; but it yielded him no pleasure; he felt that the cold edge of suspicion had come between him and his new master."

"I *think* that Waine is all right, and I know the old man trusted him, but I must look into this matter," muttered Blundell Fairhoe, as Silas went out. "My rascally brother may have had something to do with it; and, unless we find a receipt or memorandum, it looks badly—they may be pulling together."

"Lying, or what's all the same, acting out a lie, God help me! But, no; that isn't likely, the prayers of the wicked are an abomination, and the fate of Ananias may be mine. That man suspects me, and yet I dare not tell him, or the dead would witness against me," said Silas, as he strode along the dark road that led to his cottage. But with this sort of prevarication in self-defence he had not done yet.

All next day he and Blundell were busy. Waine's accounts were all found scrupulously correct, all the old man's private memorandum books were carefully kept. There was very little confusion, and the mortgage money had been carefully paid. Only two hundred pounds or so remained in the bank now; but to the missing money no clue had been found, except the counterfoil of the cheque by which it had been drawn, and on that was written the amount and the date, with, "fifth instalment Stretton's mortgage," in the old man's own hand.

In the midst of their business two visitors were announced—Mr. Sharpe, the old Squire's solicitor, from Grundon, and Mr. Ralph Fairhoe. The greeting between the brothers was, on the one side self-possessed, but cold and constrained as might be; on the other, half-deprecating, half-defiant. The first question asked by the lawyer was, whether a will had been found. He had made one some years before, and the disposition of the property was peculiar; he couldn't altogether remember how it was bequeathed, for he was only a clerk to his predecessor at the time, and had newly come into the neighbourhood. Then a fresh search began, but no will was discovered.

"By-the-by, when did you last see our father before his death, Mr. Ralph?" said Blundell, suddenly turning round upon his brother, and, like the ancient mariner, fixing him with his glittering eye.

The other was taken off his guard, and, for the life of him, couldn't help blenching a little; then saw that his brother noticed it, and changed colour.

"Oh, not for ever so long," he replied, with an attempt at carelessness; "he never would listen to reason, and so I kept away from him."

"Ah! because there was a sum of money taken out of the bank that we can't find any account of. I thought you might give us some information."

"Oh! you'd better ask Waine there about that," retorted Ralph, maliciously; "he knew, I should say, pretty well every penny that the old man had, and had the fingering of most of it; and then he was with him at the last, you know, and I wasn't."

"He hadn't the fingering of this it seems, and whoever had, it has stuck to their fingers. Let me see, you said that you were sent for on the Tuesday of the week before last, didn't you, Mr. Waine?"

"Yes," replied Silas, standing opposite to Ralph and looking him full in the face, "and I heard that your brother was here on that same day."

Ralph grew uneasy, "Who the devil told you that?" he said.

"Somebody told me, you may be sure," replied Silas. "It was said that you had hired a horse in Grundon and rode over here, and that you came back into the road after a short visit, and went back to London that night."

"All a mistake of some of these clodhopping fools; mistook the doctor for me, I shouldn't wonder," said Ralph, recovering himself again; "but what's to be done? If Waine knows nothing of it, you may be sure

I don't, and it's no use crying over spilt milk. You don't think the old man made me a present of it, do you?"

"Not the slightest suspicion of the sort," said Blundell, coolly.

On the next day arrived Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, with the young heir of the family, Master Oswald—a pretty, delicate-looking boy, with curling chestnut hair and blue eyes, which had in them none of the cold glitter of his father's. A waggon-load of luggage arrived at the house, under the care of a man-servant and Mrs. Fairhoe's own maid—a sallow, reddish-haired, greenish-eyed, genteel young person, with that sort of suppressed air which is often more really defiant and impudent than assumption—a manner which seemed to say, "Never mind me; I know my station; though, if I chose, I could mention a few particulars, which," &c., &c., &c., the rest being left to the imagination of the beholder.

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe had borne out the promise which she gave to the world when she was Miss Helena Bullpoint. A cold, graceful, haughty, and yet condescending and not inconsiderate gentlewoman. What love there was in her belonged, no doubt, to her husband and their child; but it was of a very aristocratic pattern, and there was none of it to spare for any very ordinary occasions. She would, doubtless, have acknowledged in church the duty of loving her neighbour as herself, and that wasn't saying much, for she had very little self-love in its coarser and more general sense. Her neighbours meant people of her own order.

She was not altogether wanting in benevolence to those beneath that sacred rank; but, if anybody had hinted to her that she ought to love and cherish the cottagers of Fairhoe, she would probably have elevated her fine eyebrows, and laughed that little laugh, half petulant, half scornful, which it is said had been her great attraction to Blundell Fairhoe, and led him on to renew his suit, after she had met his first advances with that silvery salute.

Tall and handsome still, but with her face rather paler than it would appear in the morning after her toilette, she walked into the old house where she was henceforth to be the mistress. Her dark hair was already flecked here and there with a silver thread; but she made no effort to conceal this touch of Time, who had treated her so gently in other respects. She was too proud for such poor artifices, too proud and too conscious of her seeming unconscious beauty.

Very beautiful, and yet with all the dignity of the matron, she appeared next day in her mourning dress, with little Oswald by her side, his brilliant complexion set off by the heavy crape that trimmed his little coat. It was the day of the funeral, and all the servants were in mourning too. Their footfalls as they went about that dim old house resounded in dull echoes, as though they waked those other echoes that belonged to the haunted walk in the plantation.

At noon the hearse and mourning-coaches came, and were followed by a cavalcade of men-servants and retainers—the brothers, and the reigning representative of the Bullpoints (Mrs. Fairhoe's brother), and the principal tenant on the estate, filling the first carriage; and the solicitor, the doctor, and Silas Waine bringing up the rear of vehicles, with those of the neighbouring squires who were invited or who chose to pay this last tribute of respect.

The procession had to pass Silas Waine's cottage; and there, at the door, stood his old servant holding little Barbara by the hand—the child's pale face and bright golden hair heightened in effect by the black merino frock she wore. Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, in a close carriage, with her little son, who had asked that he might go to see the funeral (not knowing much what death meant, poor child!), looked out beneath the blind, and, seeing that little golden head and the ivory face, wondered where it could have come from.

When they reached the old elm-shadowed corner of the churchyard at Grundon, where the tomb of the Fairhoes stood, like a gigantic stone tea-urn upon a marble linen-chest, she sent a servant to ask Silas Waine to come and take the boy with him while she waited at the gate.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!" As the solemn words of the burial service sounded, Ralph Fairhoe had a hard struggle to look unmoved, not from any deep sensation of true sorrow that he felt within his bosom, but his brother's eye was on him even then; and on the opposite side, a little apart, the steward, with his stern face made even more lowering by the crape weepers that shadowed it, looked at him balefully from under his heavy brows, and held that fair-haired boy in his arms.

"You are the steward at Fairhoe, I learn, Mr. Waine," said Madame, when he carried the child back to the close carriage; "can you tell me who was that very aristocratic-looking, pretty little girl who stood at a door that we passed on the road—a little golden-haired creature—not one of the farmer's children, I'm sure?"

"It was my little daughter, Barbara," said Waine, with an unusual colour in his cheeks and a sudden lifting of the cloud that overhung his brow, "my only child."

"Indeed; is—— pardon me—I know no one here—her mother is living, I hope?"

"Dead, madam, before I came to Fairhoe. We are quite alone, Barbara and I."

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe's nature was hard and worldly enough, but she had a gentlewoman's instincts.

"Poor little birdie," she said, gently, "you must bring her to see me directly we are settled; nay, why not bring her back with you to-day?" She added, "She can stay with me till you go home to-night, or Dame Saltash shall relieve me of her if I have to attend on guests."

So Barbara was taken back in the carriage with her father, wondering how so much honour should be done her, and marvelling still more at the beautiful stately lady who asked her her name, and gave her a plate of sweet cakes, and bade her sit down on the low chair by the wide fireplace, the lady herself holding a little boy upon her knee—a boy who was to be master of Fairhoe one day, and who was called Oswald.

The funeral baked meats were coldly but not illiberally furnished in one of the lower rooms; and when the undertaker's men had departed, with some of the more humble followers, to slake their thirst in the servants' quarter, Mrs. Fairhoe was summoned to do the honours of the house for a ceremonial half hour or so. She called to her lady's-maid to go in and look after the children, and that suppressed person went as far as the room door, whence, when her mistress's back was turned, she retired again to put her own boxes in order in one of the upper chambers. Thus Dame Saltash, going in some half hour afterwards, saw the two children standing in the window beneath the heavy curtain, watching the black horses champing their bits and flecking their sleek sable coats with foam; and the heir of Fairhoe had his arm round his companion's neck.

"Lord 'a mercy!" said the old dame to herself, between a sigh and a laugh, "what a pretty pair! Reminds me of the old ballad of the babes in the wood." She was unconscious of the fact that the door had opened silently, and that a stealthy intruder had come in, until she heard a "He, he, he, he!" behind her, and there stood Mrs. Fairhoe's maid.

Dame Saltash turned round sharply enough; for she was a stiff-backed, bright-eyed, brisk old lady, and not easily flustered, especially when she had on her stout, rustling black silk, her lace mittens, her best headgear, and was got up expressly for company. She must have been a pert servant enough who would have got over her, even though that servant had been a lady's-maid of undoubted foreign origin.

"What may you want, miss?" she said, sharply; looking the intruder up and down again, as though with a grim determination to take her measure accurately. "It wasn't this bell rung."

The other stood with her long bony fingers interlaced over the front of her black lace pelerine.

"Madame desired me to come here to remain with Master Oswald and this—this little person," she said, with a spiteful simper.

"Oh! then it was you that ought to ha' been here nearly half an hour ago, I s'pose," retorted Mrs. Saltash, with increased asperity.

"I was engaged, Mem, if you *must* know."

"I do know, *Miss*. I saw you talking to Mr. Ralph Fairhoe, outside the oak chamber, where the squire died. You needn't wait."

The lady's-maid was discomfited, changed colour, looked more spiteful still, and beat a hasty retreat.

The guests went away, till only two or three of the nearest neighbours remained; then these, also, departed, and only Waine, the lawyer, and the brothers remained. Mrs. Fairhoe had gone up to the drawing-room again, where candles were lighted in the old-fashioned silver sconces and the children sat looking at the fire, but no longer talking, nor with Oswald's arm round the little girl's neck. No will had been discovered, though every likely place had been searched.

Blundell Fairhoe scarcely regretted it, for almost all the property was his by inheritance, without any will at all. Ralph was secretly rejoiced, for he knew that, had such a document existed, his name would have been struck out of it. Each was concealing his thoughts, as he believed, from the other.

"Come, Ralph, you say you won't stay with us to-night, and, faith, it *would* be a little inconvenient; not but what you're quite welcome, of course," said Blundell, with bland insincerity. "What shall we settle? You hear what Sharpe here says about the value of your share of the personalty and all the rest of it, and it would be a pity to break up the old place and the old lumbering furniture. You'd never get above nine hundred or a thousand altogether that way. I'll deal generously with you, and give you twelve."

"Say fifteen," said Ralph, anxiously. "Curse it! you've got everything, and there's nothing hardly to divide, because it's all on the land instead of in the bank——"

"Ha! you're referring to that four hundred, I see," said Blundell, with all the glitter in his eyes and the cold steel in his face again. "I forgot that; but still I expect I shall have to pay that over again, as I can't find the receipt. No, I can't say more than twelve hundred—take it or leave it; and, if you agree, you must give me a full acquittance."

"But what if a will should be found?"

"If it's in your favour, you shall repay me without interest; if it's all in mine, I make you a present of the amount."

"A very generous offer, indeed," said Mr. Sharpe, warmly.

"Done!" said Ralph, a little eagerly. And so the matter was settled, and when Ralph rode away with a draught in his pocket Blundell sat down the master of Fairhoe.

But his tenure was short, for, though he was master there, he was not his own master. He intended to sell out and live the life of a country gentleman. He would write to his agents, or, what was better, run up to London himself to-morrow. To-morrow, however, was, according to its habit, long in coming, and several weeks had passed before he could settle affairs. Then one morning a horseman dashed up to the door in great haste, and the master of Fairhoe saw the messenger in his own room, whence he went up presently with a flushed face to kiss his wife and child and bid them a farewell that was to be almost his last greeting on earth.

In the great Peninsular War, at Quatre Bras, at Ligny, the British army abroad had been hewing their way to fame by battles that have since become historical; and now the stay-at-homes, many of whom had been pining and fretting in barracks or lounging about town in hopes of joining in the mêlée, were to have their chance.

An hour with Mr. Sharpe, who was sent for post haste—a last, sad, lingering kiss—and he who had but just come into his own old home was away to join the rest, amidst that gay and glittering crowd that thronged the streets of the quaint old Continental city in those bright June days. At last came that one sad drizzling morning when the armies looked out over the mist and smoke of the battle-field; and, before the red sun went down upon the heaps of slain, Blundell Fairhoe lay upon his face, dead.

CHAPTER V.

MOTHER AND SON.

Fairhoe was very desolate when the news of the great victory reached England, and the note of mourning sounded in a wailing undertone amidst the jubilant shouts of triumph. The chimes which sounded the glad tidings of conquest were jarred by the strokes of the funeral bells, booming out solemnly for the dead; and that flag which was sung in so many patriotic songs, and alluded to in such a multitude of gratulatory speeches, took a new place in the public regard, as the pall that covered the coffins of thousands of brave and hopeful men slain in battle.

The quiet woods round a hundred ancestral houses were all green with summer leaves; and yet the soft wind seemed hushed to a melancholy cadence as the owners of the land went to and fro, their sable dresses casting a shadow on the bright sunny slopes. In many a more humble home the trimly-kept gardens bloomed in full luxuriance, and seemed to blush that they should be so bright and gay, when the flower of the household had been cut down as grass, and lay in that far-off cemetery, where strangers' hands had placed it, to await the resurrection. But the sorrow was national, and this community in suffering helped to heal the heart wounds; so that many a widowed head was raised after a season, and bereaved faces smiled, sadly it is true, but smiled amidst their tears; for husband and lover, brother and father, had gone out bravely, in the face of death, because death went hand-in-hand with duty.

In that old house, into which she had come while the funeral shadow was upon it, the mistress of Fairhoe sat for a time, as though her stately figure and her proud heart had been petrified with a grief of which she gave few outward tokens. Her brother, Langley Bullpoint, came over to confer with Sharpe, the solicitor; but he could give her little comfort. He was little used to sympathise with anybody, although he had a wife and children of his own; for he was a singularly reserved man, with a crust upon him which he seldom cared to break through—a sort of rind composed of pride and awkwardness. His younger brother had gone up to London, and had become quite a diplomatist there in Governmental circles; but Langley, who was the head of the house, had always stayed by the land, was a Conservative in politics; and, though his own family influence could command for him the best society, cherished such a complete code of haughty etiquette, that his wife was never heard of during their annual trip to town in the season, except at those ceremonious assemblies where every invitation seemed to be given for some state purpose. The pride of the Bullpoints was of a different kind to that of the Fairhoes, but it was equal in degree; and Langley and his sister met—when they came together at all—with a frigid and almost repellant appreciation of each other, which scarcely ever reached the confines of intimacy.

Mrs. Langley and her two daughters came over; and the diplomatist arrived from London when the proper time had elapsed and etiquette permitted; but before their visit, another member of the family had been there, full of gentle pity, and a keen desire to show some sort of sympathy in that time of bereavement. It was only two days after the news of Blundell's death had reached his wife and child, and when the household was all in confusion, that a gentle, pale-faced lady, in deep mourning, had come quietly up to the door and asked to see the housekeeper.

Old Dame Saltash came down presently, and found the visitor standing in the hall, looking very pretty, but very wistful and timid.

"I have asked for you that I might send a message to Mrs. Fairhoe," she said. "Tell her that a messenger has come from her sister, Mrs. Gabriel, to ask whether she would like to see her, and if she can be of service?"

The housekeeper came back presently to say that Mrs. Fairhoe would be glad if Mrs. Gabriel could come on at once, and was a little surprised at a request to announce her there and then; "For I am Mrs. Gabriel, and Mrs. Fairhoe is my sister," said the lady, in explanation, as she followed to the dining-room, where the mistress of the house stood looking out at the lawn, with her boy holding to her hand.

Now, Mrs. Gabriel was the disgrace to the family of the Bullpoints. She had forgotten what was due to her name and station, and had damaged the family name, and lowered its pride, by engaging herself, when a mere girl, to a curate, who was little more than a mere boy. He was not exactly forbidden the house; he was too much of a gentleman for that, and the family were much too aristocratic to resort to so vulgar an expedient; but he was quietly allowed to understand that he had no claim there. It ended in Amelia Bullpoint leaving home by the connivance of a friendly housemaid, and presenting herself, with her faithful attendant, at the curate's house one morning. After this step there was nothing for it but to be married as quickly as possible; and married they were for five happy years, during which Amelia's name was never mentioned by her kith and kin, except with raised eyebrows and a depreciating shrug. When her mother lay ill, however, she had called for her, and by that time the gentle girl had had sorrows of her own, as an empty cradle and a tiny pair of shoes upon the dressing-table at her husband's rectory could testify. She became the consoler of the household for a time, and they needed it, for all their pride, for the mother's illness was long and painful. She and her husband visited the house at stated intervals afterwards, until the light went out of her own life, and she was left a widow. Not that the light had gone out either, for she carried gentle kindness, and the sweet sympathy that comes of sorrow, with her to those who most needed it. She was independent of any Bullpoint of them all, for her prudent curate had insured his life, and an uncle of his had died worth five thousand pounds.

It had, indeed, fallen to this gentle little diligent woman to go like an angel to the houses of sorrow, and she seemed to prefer it to feasting and making merry, though there was a blessed cheerfulness in her pensive face—a sort of soft light was upon it always—and few people who knew her best would have been surprised to see a kind of saintly nimbus encircling that head, with its plain, smooth plaits of light brown hair.

Three days after the arrival of the news of Blundell's death, and while she was there with her sister, another visitor had been announced, and was shown up-stairs, where he stood at the drawing-room door, with his hat under his arm, and making a military salute with the hand which was not in a sling.

They had instinctively guessed his mission when his name was announced as Sergeant Robert Cobbold, and the measured clamp of his boots was heard upon the stairs.

He had not much to say, but his Captain had given him a last letter and a packet before the battle. He had, as "her Ladyship" knew, been with Captain Blundell Fairhoe for two years or more, and would have laid down his life for him, if that could have saved his; but, if her "Ladyship would forgive him"—and here he broke down into a silent weeping, which was a strange thing to see, for he kept his stern military face almost unmoved, as the tears fell upon his bronzed cheeks; then he handed the packet to the lady, and put his hand before his eyes with a delicacy which she was lady enough to appreciate and to thank him for in her heart; for this last packet, and especially the one short, serious, loving letter, last written by the hand so soon to be stilled in death, had a strangely softening influence upon her, and as she opened them, her head was bowed down upon her sister's shoulder, and for once the artificial restraints of her life gave way, as she forgot even her family pride in the outburst of natural grief.

The keen edge of her sorrow came so close to her at that moment, that she could not choose but to flinch from it a little; and so the two women cried and clung to each other, and the boy, who had begun to cry too, somehow made his way to the sergeant's knee, where he was soon in whispered conversation about the battle where poor papa was killed, and asking why Robert Cobbold had not brought his sword with him, for the little lad remembered the honest soldier very well as one of his prime playmates when his father took him to the barracks at Belfast.

It was perhaps to preserve this diversion to the little fellow's feelings that Cobbold was asked to stay and dine in the housekeeper's room, and afterwards to walk about with Master Oswald in the grounds. Neither the sergeant nor the boy was loth to take this chance of renewing acquaintanceship, and when the messenger went away, it was understood that he should come down to Fairhoe again, and, indeed, whenever he found opportunity. "And thankful am I," said the kind-hearted sergeant to himself, as he clanked away to meet the coach, "that my lady (he always called her so, in spite of reproof) has got one that must be next door to an angel to her at such a time as this,"—a remark which referred to Mrs. Gabriel, whose sweet womanly presence had gone straight to that soldier's heart, and made him her respectful and obedient servant, if need should be, for evermore.

So Mrs. Gabriel was swept away before the whirlwind of rank and fashion that came over the old Hall, and all the family went into mourning; while the widow and her little son accepted an invitation to spend a month at Langley Hall, the seat of the Bullpoints, where everybody was ready to observe a polite and distinguished period of grief.

Of his little boy Blundell Fairhoe had written a few parting words, and had also left some instructions with Lawyer Sharpe, in case of the event which had happened. He was to have instruction at home for two or three years, and then was to go to a public school, the father having a preference for Winchester, where the Fairhoes had been for three or four generations. But there was no immediate necessity to discuss that point, although the Bullpoints were in favour of Eton. More to the purpose was the offer to take the child to live at Langley, where he might have the advantage of being educated with his two younger cousins, Adeliza and Beatrice, who were already small encyclopædias of learning, by the aid of masters and professors.

But this arrangement could not be carried out altogether, for the mother could not deny herself the sight of the boy, and young Oswald himself rebelled at once, utterly disregarding the distinction of becoming an inmate of the ancestral seat of his uncle's family. For the present, then, he went back to Fairhoe, and had a long holiday, till somebody could be found to impart to him the first rudiments of learning.

During all that summer, and until the autumn days waned into long, wet, nights, with a chill sough of wind sending the brown leaves whistling from the trees, little Oswald was out and about Fairhoe woods and across the country side on the pony that Silas Waine had bought for him. It was a little beauty, and so thoroughly trained and broken that Silas had great praise for his discretion; but, in truth, it was Marian Rooke who had taken the responsibility, and her half-gipsy brother had spent a good deal of his time in breaking and training the little surefooted creature, which would nibble sugar from the boy's hand, or suffer him to get upon his back in any fashion that pleased him best.

When Sergeant Robert Cobbold came down, as he did two or three times before that long holiday was over, he and Oswald went scampering away, nutting or blackberrying, or to find all sorts of wonders in the woods and fields; they even went fishing in the little stream beyond the Fairhoe land, and Oswald learned to fire a pistol, and to hit a mark with a bow and arrow, for he was stronger now, and the holiday was coming to an end too soon to neglect these accomplishments, though the sergeant was careful to extract a promise that his young charge should never attempt to play with firearms unless he himself loaded and handed them to him.

During those long rambles he was pretty often at the steward's cottage, where Silas himself would give the young master a little of his choice fruit, and where Sergeant Cobbold would also drop in occasionally to smoke a pipe, while they both had a rest on their way home.

Sometimes a little demure silent girl was there, sitting by the window with some piece of plain needlework, or conning the lesson-book that she had brought home with her from the day-school at Grundon. She would jump up to greet her father, who, with his broad hand upon her bright curls, would put her gently back into her seat again, unless she was wanted to fetch a jug of ale for the sergeant, or to find him a clean pipe in the little deal closet next the fireplace.

The sergeant was quite a military hero to the little maid, and her large eyes were often fixed upon his tall, square, martial figure, in mute speculation as to the stories he could tell, if only she dare to ask him; but their acquaintance was a very quiet one, though the sturdy soldier had brought her a toy or two, and a china mug from London, and would sometimes stoop his brown face to kiss her little soft hand when she put it out to greet him. Once, too, he carried her out, and sat her upon the young master's pony, but she begged to be taken down again, for she saw Oswald standing there laughing at her; and, though she remembered him very well, and, indeed, had twice been up to "the house" to spend a half-holiday, under Mrs. Saltash's charge, the two children were scarcely acquainted. She did not, it is true, drop the same sort of curtsey to Master Oswald as she felt it incumbent to bestow upon his mother; but, young as she was, she already felt the awkwardness that arose from the different station of the young visitor. That was obvious enough in the manner both of her father and of honest Robert Cobbold himself, and she had never been instructed how to regard it, and so the two children simply stared at each other. Master Oswald often kept sidling about the window, and once or twice spoke to her about his pony, and asked her if she would not like to ride to school upon it; but they were shy of each other, and the boy was diffident of saying too much to a little woman who was always employed, even though he could see her eyes wander from book or sampler to watch him as he walked up and down, or laid out upon the clean deal table the treasures that he had picked up in his rambles in the wood. He had contrived, however, to leave her quite a collection of these articles—egg-shells, mosses, odd fragments of stone, butterflies, and field-flowers, to which he generally called her attention, just before he went away, by saying, "Oh, if you'd like some of these you may have them; I've plenty more at home."

The time for Oswald to go to school soon arrived, and he was at home at the old house only during the holidays, when he renewed his acquaintance very heartily, both with the steward and with Sergeant

Cobbold; but he seldom saw Barbara, who had gone to London to stay with a cousin of her father, and to improve as much as possible the education she had received at Grundon, by attending an "Academy" in the City, where several merchants' daughters were perfected in genteel accomplishments. It may be doubted whether Silas himself would have agreed to this arrangement, but for his cousin's persuasions; but she was a precise, middle-aged lady, very well connected, in consequence of her husband holding some office in the India House; and she had taken a genuine liking to her little protégée, all the more warm, perhaps, that she herself was childless.

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, now that her son was at Rugby—for there had been a compromise between Eton and Winchester—spent a great part of her time at her brother's at Langley Hall, and accompanied his family to London during the season, so that she was moving in that dignified circle of fashion which is both dull and expensive. The Fairhoe mortgages had been very little reduced since her management of the estate, and, in spite of Silas Waine's efforts, ready money ran very short after Oswald's allowance and his mother's milliner's bills were paid. Not that Silas knew much about the financial affairs of the family, but he guessed that they were not flourishing, and devoted himself, without receiving even the poor pay of thanks, to make the most of land in which improvements were sadly needed, but upon which there was no money to spend.

Both he and his mistress looked forward to the time when the heir of the house would take a personal part in its management; but there was little hope of Oswald making a very practical farmer, or a model country squire. He had developed into a studious, quiet youth, not incapable of physical exertion, but without much disposition for the practical part of a country life. He would rather go botanizing in the woods, than inspect the timber for felling, and might be seen sauntering in the shrubbery with a book of poems, when other young fellows would be at the river, or riding across country. He was clever—there was no doubt of that—and had already contributed to two or three local papers, where his verses created quite a sensation, though they appeared under an assumed name. His uncle Bullpoint thought he should go to college; but Mrs. Fairhoe knew too well where the shoe pinched to entertain the idea; so that, as the Bullpoints were never famous for giving anything except advice, she could only look forward to her son's leaving Rugby, in the hope that he might be inspired with a zeal for improvement, for which their reduced expenses would help to pay.

But an altogether new influence had come into young Oswald's quiet, dreamy life—an influence upon which the mother, amidst the ceremonious gaiety of London, had never calculated—one of which she would, perhaps, never learn the power.

Coming home to the solitude of the dim old house, and all its congenial stillness, the young man waited patiently enough for his mother's return. She wondered sometimes that he should care so little to stay in London with her; and that, after a few days spent in "society," where his graceful figure, and fair, intelligent face, as well as his dreamy eyes, and half-intellectual, half-fanciful talk, made quite a sensation in that select coterie—he should hurry down to Fairhoe again, to prepare for her coming. This was the more distasteful to her, inasmuch as she foresaw how easily, when he became a little older, he might make a prudent marriage, and so win for himself a position in society, and disencumber the family estate. Those dreamy eyes, and that gift of poetic babbling, were just then worth a fortune to any young man who had the entrée to "the best circles!" for a melancholy air, and an assumed superiority of genius to ordinary mundane affairs, were "the fashion." It may be doubted whether Oswald Fairhoe might not have secured the very first wealthy and sentimental miss whom he had chosen to honour with his attention; and as to her parents, Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, still proud and beautiful, Langley Bullpoint, the stately, and Vivian Bullpoint, the diplomatist, were there; and if these three were not enough for any ordinary parent or guardian, it would be difficult to say what would suffice.

But Oswald Fairhoe seemed to care no more for marriage—which, by-the-bye, would have been a little premature, as he was only eighteen—than he did for fashionable society, and so his mother waited and hoped that, when his character was more developed, all would be well. But that influence which has been already alluded to—the reader can guess what it was. Ah! those long rambles—ah! that listless, thoughtless, idle, happy time, there was a vast human interest in it, or it would never have lasted so long. Amidst the sylvan picture of trees and meadows, and darkling woods and moonlit slopes, there was one golden-haired beautiful figure that gave life to the whole scene, and which seemed to the young master of Fairhoe to be the embodiment of all that unexpressed yearning, that dumb but heartfelt longing, which perhaps is the distinction of all those who have given themselves up to the poetic sentiment, whether they have the poetic faculty or not. When Barbara Waine came home for her own holiday and saw the boy whom she remembered coming on his pony to her father's cottage grown into a young man, and leaning pensively against a tree, with his forefinger placed between the leaves of a half-closed book to mark the place, while he gazed at her in a rapt sort of way, she could scarcely realise the cause for that flutter of the heart that brought a coral pink flush upon her face. It may be supposed that, in the course of her reading at her second cousin's, she had come across two or three of the best-selected novels, and here was just the sort of hero who would commend himself to any writer of the period—just before Sir Walter Scott reformed the world of fiction. And, in point of fact, even Sir Walter himself might have looked favourably on Oswald Fairhoe; for his slim but well-formed figure, and his refined, pensive face, just shaded by its brown curls, were enhanced by that indescribable air which bespoke him a gentleman. It would be difficult to say with what kind of emotion he himself regarded the graceful girl, in whom he only just recognised the child that he had stared at so rudely some ten years before. He never tried to analyse his sentiments: they took possession of him, as it were, in a torrent of rhyme and blank verse.

Had Fairhoe been the garden of Eden, and had these two people happened to live in the golden age before the Flood instead of at that delightful period when "the first gentleman of Europe" had established a reputation for debauchery and the skilful construction of white kid smallclothes, all might have been well; but after the first enthusiasm was over, when vows had been exchanged, and the exquisite imbecility of two people being all in all to each other had sobered down into the necessity for going home to eat bread-and-butter, it became obvious that their passion must be kept a profound secret. If it was certain that Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, who, during her son's minority, had full control over him, would not regard his present engagement with favour; it was equally certain that the steward, whose deep affection for his daughter made matters all the more difficult, would take instant means to separate the lovers; and would probably leave Fairhoe for ever should he discover their stolen interviews. And so they were wise as serpents, even though they believed themselves harmless as doves; and, after Barbara had gone back again to London, Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe was compelled to revolve in her mind the singular problem that, though when he was staying at his Uncle Bullpoint's Oswald had professed the utmost distaste to the great metropolis, now that she had come home he was anxious to go up to town for a week to visit two or three of his old schoolfellows. She submitted, however, for she was glad to find him more amenable to reason; and he was at once accredited to the protection of the diplomatist, who lived in a dingy house somewhere behind Russell Square, and left his young relative to do pretty much as he liked.

What he did like, and did every day, was to wander about the streets east of Temple Bar until such time as he repaired to a little, dim, low-browed pastrycook's shop, under the shadow of St. Paul's, where a beautiful, fair, fragile, golden-headed creature sat, pretending to eat a penny bun, and then they walked about together till it became dangerous to stay out longer for fear of detection. It is surprising how long this kind of life may be endured when it only comes at intervals; and this pair of idiots (if they could have remained always in such idiocy they would have been happier, perhaps) made the round of almost every public building in London before they were found out. They *were* found out at last by Barbara's cousin's servant, who being out for a holiday, caught them in the whispering gallery at St. Paul's, and duly informed her mistress. Now, it might have been hoped that Mrs. Petifer (that was her name), being a lady of undoubted gentility and of high principle, would at once have set her face against such proceedings under the threat of telling the girl's father; but whether the novels had anything to do with it, or whether Mrs. Petifer believed that she was quite capable of conducting the affairs of her little cousin for the reputation of the family, or whether the prim, pretty, old-fashioned, kind-hearted old lady, who, by-the-by, was "a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter," and therefore had a reputation for almost preternatural cleverness as well as being a born doctress, had a heart full of sentiment for the silly pair, it is certain that, after gently scolding her young relation, she only stipulated that the lover should come to the house.

To do her justice, she saw no great disparity between the position of a poor cadet of her own family and a poor heir of the Fairhoes. The family of the Waines was a good one, and one of its members had married a Fairhoe in times gone by. Nay, if it came to that, Barbara herself was related, through her mother, to this same Oswald. The old dame offered to go herself to Mrs. Blundell and negotiate matters; but this could not be thought of, and so the matter went on and on, and the lovers met and parted sometimes at longer, sometimes at shorter intervals, until they both seemed to be wearing older under a load of sentiment. At last, on Barbara's sweet face a melancholy cloud had settled which her father viewed with loving anxiety; while a deeper shade had come upon the brow of Oswald Fairhoe, and he had relapsed into a dull and yet irritable stupor, which his mother coldly resented.

There was one person who could have told her something of her son's visits to London, and that was Ralph Fairhoe; but he had his own reasons for concealing his knowledge. He, too, had seen the young couple in one of their city rambles, and was casting about how to turn the discovery to his own advantage. But this worthy gentleman has been left standing in mortal peril ever since the second chapter, and as the author has now gossiped away this retrospective history, the reader is entreated to return to the " Load of Hay."

CHAPTER VI.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

The sudden appearance of the tinker so completely changed the current of Ralph Fairhoe's thought, that he stood irresolute how to act. He had hoped to obtain from Marion Rooke such information as would have enabled him to plot successfully for the end he had in view. The allusion to a child the offspring of his nephew and the steward's daughter was a mere surmise—a bold stroke of invention on his part—but one which his own bad knowledge of the world had commended to him as having a very probable foundation in truth. Inscrutable as the market-woman's face generally was, he believed that he had hit upon the fact. He had at present no very definite plan of action, but it had occurred to him that though, if Oswald should really have married the girl secretly, the succession to the Fairhoe property was already secured—if the child lived and its legitimacy could be proved; yet if the affair was a mere liaison, he would hold a new power over Silas Waine, with whom he had had scarcely any communication since the time of his brother's death, and who, indeed, steadily refused to confer with him, and seemed always under a sense of depression and unrest when he visited the house.

But, to cancel the advantage he had gained by this discovery, there was the certainty that his last visit to his father's death-bed was known, and the circumstances of it suspected. He felt for a moment as though the meshes of an unseen net had gathered round him, and the words that he would have uttered were choked. So he stood staring at Reuben Rooke in mingled fear and rage. His peril was imminent, and but for the woman, who threw herself between him and her brother, the blade of the clasp-knife would have been between his ribs.

"You damned dog," panted the tinker between his teeth as the foam flew from his lips; "lay a hand upon her and I'll cut out your liver, 'tis white enough to leave no stain of blood. Marion, what can this hound want with you?" he added, turning upon his sister, and striving to release his wrist from her grasp. "Tell me. You've treated me like a boy long enough, but if you can't treat me like a man in this I'll settle with him on my own score, and though not one of the tribe would steal a fowl or take the linen off a hedge on Fairhoe land, where they've been let to bide these hundred years, and have you to answer to, there's ne'er a one but would help me to hunt this fellow down, if 'twere only for revenge at losing the gold he took from the old squire's bedside more'n a dozen year ago."

Ralph was livid, but he made up his mind at once not to contest the point of an argument which was so sharply presented to him. "I came here to-night to ask a question of this woman," he said, turning to Marion. "May I ask what you have to do with it?"

"You may well not remember him," said Marion, with her hand still upon her brother's arm; "but he has reason to remember you and yours. 'Twas the old squire, whose own son you are, that sent him to prison like a felon for killing a hare with a hedgestake in the high road; and, unless report lies, 'twas you that put the old man up to it, to throw the scent off young Jershaw, that had been poaching in the woods. This is my brother Reuben, and you needn't fear for him, only I'd advise you not to threaten me, for there are as sharp eyes and ears close by, as those that saw and heard you on the night you know of, and followed you on to Grundon, where you changed the gold for notes."

Ralph cowered before the pointed finger, and turned pale at the stern, mocking voice, though he tried to smile scornfully. He was not deficient in a sort of personal courage, which scarcely feared direct attack, and could even bear up against desperate circumstances, so long as they were within his reach; but he felt the invisible net closing upon him still nearer.

"Pooh!" he said, at last, "so you have got hold of some lying gipsy story, and think to startle me with it, do you? Look to yourselves, you and this brother of yours, for *my* bark is not worse than my bite, and I can bite hard when needs be. Now let me pass."

Neither of them tried to hinder him, but as he strode towards the door Marion tightened her hold of her brother's wrist. "Be warned," she said, "what you do against old Silas Waine or his daughter! For your own race I care little, though your nephew is the best Fairhoe of you all; but I know how to speak and how to keep counsel. You came to ask me questions. I'll give no answers lest you should hear gipsy lies."

He went out, muttering to himself, and called to the landlord to bring his horse round directly; but there was a minute's delay, and Marion and her brother had passed him again in the passage leading into the common room before he left the house. He never stayed to look who had held the stirrup for him, but spurred at once along the road, anxious to reach Fairhoe before it was too late to present himself to his fashionable sister-in-law; but, before he had ridden a hundred yards, his horse fell lame, and he was compelled to dismount at the inn, where, as there was no conveyance to take him on, he remained till morning.

Marion and her brother were pacing up and down in front of the squeaking signboard that swung over the horse-trough at the "Load of Hay," when one of the two gipsy lads with the snaky eye and gleaming teeth leaped over the hedge on the other side of the road.

"He's not got farther than t'other house yonder," said he, grinning and making a sign with his hand, "trust me for that, and there'll be a farrier's bill before he goes on with that nag again."

"I owe you a good turn for this, Rorey," replied Marion, taking the lad's hand, which he half pulled away as she drew a silver ring off her own finger and placed it upon his slender thumb.

"Have you put a charm on it?" said Rorey, showing his teeth, but with a rather anxious look in his face.

"Ay, lad, as much as I can put into a ring; but the charm 'll only work while you keep your hand from stealing——"

"Nay, then take back your ring, for I see no chance of its doing me good; I 'd sooner you 'd work me a spell of another fashion."

"What, Rorey, you a true Rommany and yet give back the silver?—keep it for my sake, lad, or give it to the lass you like best; 'twill work you no harm. You see," she said to her brother, as the lithe youth nodded and tied the ring into the knot of his red handkerchief, "how well it is worth my while to keep good faith with them. You have a home in the tents when it suits you, and I can help my friends. Promise me not to touch that man, nor to say a word of what has passed to-night till I tell you, Reuben."

"First let me know your secret, then," replied the tinker, moodily. "You're main hard upon me, Marion; what was it he wanted to know?"

"Whether Oswald Fairhoe is Barbara Waine's husband."

"Yes; what else?"

"Whether they have a child."

"And have they? I heard nought o' this. Are they like to be man and wife?"

"I know no more than you do whether there is a child; but—and mind, Reuben, not a word o' this for your life, or you're no brother o' mine—they ought to be man and wife half a year ago or more; but how yonder man guessed it I'd like to find out."

Reuben bent his brows as though some difficult problem was occupying his mind; then he looked up suddenly, and, as his face lighted from its sullen expression, what gipsy blood there was in him seemed to show itself in his quick, cunning glance. "Tell me," he said, "is there any of the maids from the Hall go up with Mistress Fairhoe to London?"

"Yes, there's madam's own maid she takes with her most times."

"What like is she?"

"Oh! a greenish eye, and a quiet catlook, with pale red hair."

"Then 'twas she I saw with yonder hound in London city not a month ago. I was settin' with my tinker's kit by a dead wall down a stable-yard in a by-street near the grand folks' houses, where I'd sometimes get a knife to grind or a kettle to solder, when I heard people coming under the gateway talking—a man and a woman. I needn't tell you how one catches the people's way of listening, in case of hearing matters worth knowing, and I've done it times enough for Thyrza Lee when she was out to tell fortunes, so I left my kit and crawled towards the gates, where there was a big stone, and so squatted down. There was nothing I could make out, but he was askin' if there 'ud been any letters at the house of late, and she told him yes, there had, two or three, and that they'd been stopped."

"And you never told me o' this, Reuben!" said Marion, reproachfully.

"Why I knew nought of what it could mean, and never set eyes on the woman before nor since. What concern was it o' mine if I could do nothing with it, though I knew 'twas some devilry or other. I never dreamed 'twas aught that touched folk at Fairhoe."

"Did you hear any more?"

"Only then he said, 'Well, he'd show her how to learn more next time, but they mustn't be seen talking there; that he should be at the house in a week or two,' and so she went away and he waited till she'd gone, and then turned round and came up the yard."

"He saw you, then?"

"Yes, he saw me hammering away at a potlid, for it was the noise I made brought him to turn round; but he didn't seem to take much heed, and my face was in the pot a-looking for the holes in the bottom that wanted mending."

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe and her son, sitting in the long drawing-room, were evidently ill at ease. The face of the lady, which had, somehow, greyed and grown more stern and haughty by age, was overcast; and Oswald's fairer and softer features were contracted, as though he endeavoured to fight against some sharp spasm of pain. There were few remains of the old gloomy furniture which had belonged to the room in the late squire's time, when no womanly influence had come upon the dull house for so many years, and the nameless tokens of such a presence were all wanting; but yet there was a certain incongruous or incomplete look about the place—caused, perhaps, by that end where the low ceiling and its traversing beams looked sordid even amidst the elegant adornments that had been placed there.

But although the room was furnished with such appliances of luxury, though each separate chair and ottoman might have invited to repose, and there were accessories which would under some circumstances have conduced to an almost voluptuous ease, there was no comfort. A nameless sense of unrest was about the place, which was sufficient to lead nervous people to wander hither and thither in the utter impossibility of settling down into any seat. Let such visitors once overcome the desire to look out of window and get snugly ensconced in a chair, and they would be immediately under the impression that a door was open somewhere, or that a cat had crept behind the curtain, or that a picture hung unevenly upon the wall, or that somebody was listening at the keyhole. Most of us have been in such rooms; sometimes we have lived in houses where some particular apartment has been under this strange influence, and we were never quite easy till we had given notice to the landlord, and made arrangements for removing, when perhaps, the mysterious inconvenience would be dispelled, and we have regretted being so precipitate. Whether, in case we could renew our tenancy, the haunting sense of disquiet would return it is difficult to conjecture; people never do overcome the feeling in time to make the trial, and there is nothing of which landlords are more intolerant than this sort of undefined objection, which they always declare could be rectified with "a new paper."

Had there been no such peculiarity in the long drawing-room at Fairhoe, however, there were unhappy influences enough there on the night in question to disturb its inmates. Not a whole chancel full of ghostly visitants could have had a more depressing influence than that dumb dissension, that feeling of gloomy estrangement, that had for some months past grown between mother and son. No mystery hidden in the deepest grave, and only half revealed to either by a voice from the dead, could have wrought such gloomy foreboding as that living secret that Oswald Fairhoe brooded over, and yet dared not disclose.

He had grown so moody and pre-occupied that the chance he longed for, of leading gently to the subject and then hinting at it, never came. He was certain, too, that the haughty lady sitting there, in whose presence he still felt like a schoolboy, and with no more than a schoolboy's power of resistance to her dominant will, would sooner see him dead before her than listen to his making a misalliance; and he never could feel his way to the subject which occupied all his thoughts. His pale and now almost sickly face would flush with shame and anger when he was alone in his own room, and he would leap up and clench his hands with a sudden purpose to go and tell her all, and carry it as proudly as she. But if, in crossing the hall afterwards, he saw her stately figure on the stairs, or heard the rustle of her dress as she passed—still more, if she saw him, and came forward with her keen, cold greeting, that had so much of frost and yet so much of fire in it—his resolve died within him. There was another reason for this besides her dominant spirit and temper; for she never displayed either passion or hatred violently; they never burst into flame, they only vitrified her—turned her into crystal and made her harder and colder:—there was another reason: she loved him. Loved him as she had never loved another human being—not his father even; and her whole heart was set upon him and the position which she hoped he would take, to raise the house to its former pride and add fresh lustre to it. There was, as we have said already, so much fire and so much frost; the frost was on the top; so to speak, it crowned the mountain of her life; but the lava glowed beneath, and he knew and felt its vivid heat. Yes, and *he* loved *her*. No nature such as his could be conscious of receiving so much and yet give nothing in exchange; but what had he done for all the intensity of affection that she had hidden in her heart for him? The estate was never a penny the better for his mastership of it; nor, for that matter, had she succeeded in doing more than renewing the mortgages that crippled it, and she had added a couple of small farms to the wrong side of the Fairhoe ledger. This he knew; and there was more that he did not know—a debt to her brother, Langley Bullpoint, who had no objection to grace his circle by the splendid presence of his handsome sister, but who had a rooted antipathy to paying for the distinction of being so nearly related to her. Between mother and son, then, there was concealment, and neither of them knew the weight of the burden that each had to bear. He, at all events, had frustrated her heart's desire, and how could he tell her so? She had looked forward for years to that brilliant marriage which he had been informed was all that was wanting for the restoration of the Fairhoes to their pride and dignity; and he had gone on heedless, seeking his happiness other whither, until it was all too late. Would that he were dead; and yet then two women, of whom he could not say which he loved most, would go heart-stricken all their days, and neither know what he had suffered for them. You see he was a coward and a self-dissector. He could calculate to a nicety the degree of turpitude of which he had been guilty, could define accurately its cause and consequences, and torture himself with self-reproaches *after* the mischief was done; but, being a coward, the reaction came, and his remorse seldom produced "fruits meet for repentance." There is no more weakening moral process than a continual self-analysis. Witness many of the so-called diaries and personal reflections of very good and pious people which have been foolishly published, and have helped to disorder the world of thought. If Oswald Fairhoe had been subject to peculiar religious influences, *he* would have written a diary at this period; as it was, he sat and brooded, and daily became more feeble and purposeless, for even his physical health was giving way under constant confinement to the house. He had no heart for amusement, no eye for nature, even though it wore the dull autumnal aspect which was in harmony with his own depression.

His mother had over and over again remonstrated with him—tenderly at first, then in tones less of entreaty than of command; and now she regarded him with a suspicion that gave a bitter tone to reproaches which must have arisen from some perception of the trouble that lay upon him.

He bent his face over the book, so that the flicker of the wood fire might not reveal the crimson flush that dyed his temples.

" Oswald, Oswald ! " she said, " how can I bear this, and yet remember that you are son of mine ? What is to become of Fairhoe and of that name that you should be proud to bear, while you are wasting days that might be turned to such good account ? Of what avail has it been that I have kept a place for you amongst people whose equal you should be, if you drag the family pride down into the mire ? What words can rouse you to self-respect—what effort will wake you from the miserable dream you are pursuing ?

" Mother, what would you have ? " he retorted, with burning cheeks ; " what disgrace have I brought upon you ? How can I show the family pride by an interested marriage—contracted for the express purpose of saving the land from the bailiffs ? You contradict yourself."

She looked at him so coldly, and yet with such scornful pity in her eyes, that he could not return her glance.

" May I ask what you *would* marry, then, if a good dowry would be such an insuperable objection in a wife suitable in every other respect of rank and station and personal gifts? For what purpose do you suppose I have spent more than our means would bear in holding my own part in society and in inviting guests here, but that you might reap the advantage of it by an alliance worthy of us both? Do you mean to tell me," she added, bending forward, and speaking almost fiercely, "do you mean to tell me that your infatuation goes so far as to persist in a mere boyish liking for a servant's daughter instead of becoming master of this house, of which you are now the head, and uniting the family name to one which will not disgrace it, as well as to a fortune which will be willingly devoted to renewing the influence which is ours by right? Never dare to tell me so, or I shall believe you are mad—no, not mad: there is some sense of nobility in madness—idiotic!"

"Who is this that you would mate me to, mother? Am I to be disposed of without a word in the matter? At least let me know the name of her who is willing to do so much that she may bear mine." The poor wretch made a miserable attempt to laugh off the allusion to Barbara Waine.

"You know already; you have met her in London, and, but for your foolish blindness, might have seen what I have told you to-night. I spoke of Caroline Blamyre, Lady Flakestone's daughter."

"Why, I thought the Fairhoes were above titles?"

"So they are, and she has none. But come, you are growing amenable to reason, I see. My dear boy! dear Oswald!"—(Oh, how her tone softened! and he thought he could see the bright tears springing into those stern eyes, and shining in the red firelight)—“ do, do rouse yourself. You must give up this miserable folly—nay,” for he had half risen and held out his hand, “ I know what you would say; but it was mere boyish folly. There can be no faith kept or demanded from any foolish love-making of that sort, though it is a calamity that you should so have degraded yourself. The girl will forget you, of course; and you will bitterly rue it if you give her fresh cause to remember you. My boy, my boy, I am your mother, and almost gave my life for you at your birth, and you must think no more of this. Waine has been a just servant, and I will say nothing harsh of him or his; but they must find a home amongst their own people, and you must wake and be your own steward, with a stake in the country that befits the head of this house and the husband of an heiress.”

She had moved from her chair, and was now kneeling before him, holding his hot temples between her white jewelled fingers. Then she drew down his head and kissed him. What could he do?—oh! what could he do?

He raised her gently, and they both stood up—she softened and imploring, he with a sort of radiant determination in his face. Another moment and he might have told her all; but she kissed him once again, and saying, “ I shall be going to London to-morrow, till next day; think over it while I am gone, and think over it on horseback, that your blood may be cleared of mere sickly fancies,” bade him good night, and turned to leave the room.

Infirm of purpose, he held the door open for her to pass out, and lost his chance of confession for ever.

Had she returned, she would have seen him lying on the ground, his head buried in his hands to stifle the sobs that shook the tinkling crystals of the great silver candelabra on the table.

The fire had faded to white feathery ashes, the candles had burnt out in the sockets, and the glint of a bright daybreak, pure and fresh after the rain, pierced through a space between the heavy curtains, and made a bar of gold upon the wall before he crept away and threw himself upon the couch in the barer and more dingy room that he called his study.

There he sank into a heavy sleep, such a sleep as comes in youth to soothe the pain of a great grief, to deaden the pang that is not always renewed on waking. When he at last awoke, confused, and shivering, and feverish, she was miles upon her way to London, and he had the great house to himself.

Not altogether to himself, either; for as he went up stairs to his bed-room that he might bathe and dress for the day, and so remove some of the lingering effects of the previous night, he heard a door creak stealthily, and the faint rustle of a female skirt retiring into the dressing-room attached to his mother's chamber. He knew who it was, and a feeling of undefined dread came upon him—the sudden realisation of a suspicion that had haunted him before—the suspicion that he was watched, and the belief that he knew who was the informer who had told his mother of his attachment to Barbara Waine. But he was mistaken, that information had been conveyed to Mrs. Fairhoe by no less a personage than his uncle Ralph, who—though he was no great favourite with the lady, whose instinctive aversion, added to the rumours that had occasionally reached her as to his course of life and former character, caused her to regard him rather as an ineligible acquaintance than as a relative—had contrived to be on barely visiting terms with his late brother's wife. As to Oswald, he neither felt aversion nor sympathy; he and his uncle had nothing in common, and their relationship had never ripened into friendliness.

Just as Ralph had reasons of his own to conceal his true character of a battered, case-hardened, unscrupulous roué and adventurer by an assumption of cold and worldly, but still gentlemanly, sagacity before his sister-in-law, so, in the company of his nephew, he endeavoured to sustain the part of a cynical but not unkindly observer of men — one to whom a young man might well confide many things that troubled him, with the certainty of sympathetic interest and inviolable secrecy. He was not a very good actor of either character, because he could never persuade *himself* that he was either sage or mentor; his worldly wisdom was only disguised artfulness, little above that of the horse-coper or the betting-ring trickster, only it was exercised in the higher circles of Hombourg, Baden, and the second-rate hells which even then lingered about St. James's Street and the purlieus of the "West-End." He had the entrée to a certain society in which he never met Mrs. Blundell

Fairhoe; but he had once or twice gained admission to those more select réunions where he saw her received with much honour and dignity, and where she received him with a freezing courtesy and a surprised recognition which cut him to the quick, because, though he took care to proclaim their relationship, she made it inexpressibly evident that what was a source of credit to him was to her little short of a calamitous accident.

After frequent meetings, however, and a few visits to Fairhoe, in which he had assumed so self-possessed and coldly-polite a manner that he began to think himself quite qualified to take rank as a gentleman of the old school, and would really have been rather successful if he had been a little more of a hypocrite and a good deal less of a bully, she had begun to tolerate him. Then he wrote to her a letter, worded with considerable ingenuity, and in a tone of calm, sorrowful deprecation, telling her of his unavoidable suspicion that Oswald was likely to degrade the name—which was, of course, dear to them both—by a mere boyish fancy for a very worthy and virtuous person, but one occupying a far different station; and so on, for a couple of pages of smooth Bath post, neatly folded, and sealed with the family arms, although he omitted to mention that the great gold seal was taken out of the desk that stood by the old squire's bedside on a certain night many years before.

Mrs. Fairhoe smiled contemptuously when she read that part of the letter referring to the family name; but her brows contracted when she remembered how her son had come down to the old house and left her in London, now that she learnt the reason for his preference in the hints contained in these lines. So Ralph Fairhoe had been in the neighbourhood, too; and she asked herself with what intention he could have visited the house while she was absent. It never occurred to her that her own waiting-maid—she with the greenish eyes and reddish hair, who did very well for Fairhoe, but who was generally superseded by Mrs. Bullpoint's more skilful French attendant while her mistress was in London—was the real discoverer of this state of affairs. This woman felt additional delight, beyond the reward that she expected of Ralph, in watching and spying, as a means of revenge for being left behind in that great gloomy house when her mistress was away.

It was only on two occasions that she was thus left to her own devices for obtaining amusement in the solitude of the dull rooms, or the more lively but less dignified society of the servants' hall; but she made full use of her opportunity, especially as Mrs. Saltash, who had grown older and very infirm, had not relaxed in her first grim dislike of "the new comer," as she always persisted in calling her.

Time had not mollified this asperity of Dame Saltash, and it assuredly had not improved the personal disadvantages of Mittens, for that was the name "the new comer" bore; and, except from the groom, who placed Miss before it, or the scullery-maid, who called her "Mum," by that name she was invariably called. She was silent, as prim, as shifty-eyed, and as undemonstrative now as ever; her chief expression of contempt, or defiance, or appreciation, or comfort, or annoyance, consisting of a series of sharp sniffs, and a cat-ish, greeny gleam. Such people change but little, and the only alteration in her was an unctuous flabbiness of face and a fleck or two of dingy white in the orange-tawny hair which was put back under her ribboned cap.

In the course of her exploration she had called at Silas Waine's cottage on more than one occasion, to ask for a draught of water or to beg that she might sit down to rest, and, having seen Barbara there, had regarded her with all the small venom that her beauty would be sure to raise in such a nature. This was no doubt increased by her unsuccessful overtures towards a kind of intimacy.

"*I* didn't ought to say so, of course; but I always stand up for fair beauties," she remarked on one of these occasions; "and if there's anything in what they call affinities of dispersition, as the dream-books has it, we ought to be quite good friends, we're both so light."

Barbara opened her beautiful blue eyes in wonderment, and answered nothing; but the grim old steward could not repress a contortion of the mouth, which was a very bad apology for a smile. He had a personal dislike to this woman which he could never explain, and it had been shared by his old servant Deborah, but now she was dead, and a woman from the village kept his house when Barbara was away, which was too often for his own happiness, though he never complained. Indeed, his was a nature to which much happiness in this world is perhaps impossible,—a grim, stern, hardly-crusted nature—self-accusing, self-torturing, obstinate, and yet sceptical with the scepticism which distrusts joy and *mis*trusts mercy. Such happiness as he had he was willing enough to sacrifice for the girl; and, if his life had been required to secure her peace of mind, he would have laid it down willingly. Though it must not be forgotten that life is somehow of more seeming value to these joyless than to more gay and buoyant beings, there is a deeply-grained vitality in such rugged natures which takes much to suppress it. Those who wrestle with life hardest hold it tightest.

There may have been some metaphysical reason for the dislike of Silas Waine to Mittens, for it was from her hand that the blow was to come that first smote his heart in reference to his child. The blow was delivered with a paw rather than a hand. The waiting-maid tried to sheathe her claws in velvet, but the claws were there. It was on the morning of the day on which Mrs. Fairhoe had the conversation with her son which has just been recorded that Mittens walked over to the steward's cottage. She knew that Silas hated her, and, as far as her weaker soul went (and what it wanted in strength it made up in spite), she returned the sentiment with interest.

Silas had just come in for his morning snack of bread and cheese and his morning draught of old ale, for it was a bright, clear day, and even his heart was lifted up a little. His countenance "fell," as far as anything so low already was capable of falling, at sight of his visitor; but he motioned her to a seat, and asked her if she would have a little ale. She poured out a wineglass-full and sipped some of it, but not without making a wry face.

"May I ask what is your business with me?" said the steward, not without dignity, for he felt irritated by some kind of assumption in her manner which he could not help resenting.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, I'm sure; but I had a matter to tell you which I thought, for the good of both parties, didn't ought to wait," she replied, a little confused by his sudden address.

"What parties do you refer to, miss?" said Waine, still more sternly, and looking narrowly at her across the table.

Miss Mittens was scarcely prepared for this; she was altogether mistaken in Waine's position and character.

"Did Mistress Fairhoe send you with any message to me?" he asked; "or have you come over here to tell me something that does not concern me?"

The waiting-maid was beside herself. Here, she thought she was going to play off a little quiet piece of revenge. She had sheathed her claws to a nicety, had calculated her distance, and begun to play with her prey, when she suddenly discovered that she had made a mistake. But she rallied.

"It was respecting of what I'd heard of the young master and of Miss Barbara, your daughter — no harm, perhaps; but still sech goings on gets talked about."

Silas was aghast. "What goings on?—who talks about her?—who told you?" he said, leaping up, and looking as black as thunder.

She was a little alarmed. "Oh! there, Mr. Waine, I'm sure I wouldn't, if I was you, take it that way. Young people, you know, *is* foolish, and probable there's nothing in it; but it was them meeting in the wood and the garden, and about, that was the pity; though, for the matter of that, they're related, ain't they?—in a fashion, I've heard," she added, with a snigger.

Silas was steadying himself by the table, and looking at her from beneath his bent brows.

"Who told you this?" he said; "and how did the person that told you come to hear it? How dare you to come here and say this to me?"

"Oh! if you comes to daring, Mister Waine," retorted Miss Mittens, with such blood as she had in her up to boiling-point, "a person's got eyes, I suppose, if others hasn't; and so far from my being told, it's what I see myself many a time and often, as the play says. And if you encourage 'em in their goin's on, it's more than *my* lady does, I'll be bound. For, though I aint heard of it from others, it's my opinion *she* has, and perhaps from them as have watched the same in London when Master Oswald he was always agoin' there when missus was at home, and similar down here when your daughter was here. But, hows'ever, all's well that ends well, if it's your own doing."

Silas opened his mouth as though he was about to speak, but uttered no sound. He continued to gaze at his visitor with his face all drawn into hard knots and lines by the intensity of his emotion. Then he said, slowly and softly to himself, "I have been a fool—a fool wrapped up in my own broodings, and have not tried to think as other men think. Fool, fool! This may be true or false; but it must be seen to at any cost. I ask your pardon if I have been harsh," he said, addressing Mittens, and opening the door for her; "but I must learn the truth of this for myself. If I should find it as you say, I thank you."

She would have lingered to give him further pain, or to pursue the topic with a craving relish for some greater personal interest in it, but something in his look and manner forbade it.

"Well, good day, Mister Waine," she said; "and let's hope as she won't be overmuch heart-broken, even though she has gone such a length. There's a orkardness, of course, for a person in your persition, same as there would be in mine, and that makes it the more serspicious. But, lor! there, them as steals my purse steals trash, as the play says; but when a person loses their good name, why, it leaves 'em poor indeed. Good day, Mr. Steward; I'm raly quite sorry for you."

It was a Parthian arrow, and he went back into the room grievously wounded. All he wished was that he could carry the barb in his own heart; but he had a stern duty to fulfil—not only to guard his child from slander, but to put an end for ever to this childish first love, however deeply it might have become rooted in her life. Nay, it was impossible it could be deeply rooted. There might be no truth in it, probably no more than might be explained by an accidental renewal of that acquaintance which began when the young master used to visit his cottage with his pony and Sergeant Cobbold. Would that Sergeant Cobbold were there now; he was a true man, even though he might have little godliness, and he could advise with him in this bitter task. Well, after all, it would be an additional reason for his leaving Fairhoe. He had been growing more and more uneasy there every day, now that that false, murderous younger son of his old master had begun to come and go. He *must* have left the place at any rate; for the honour of the house was no longer safe in his keeping. Every time he set eyes upon that evil face, and encountered its devilish sneer, the scene of the old man's bed-chamber and that after scene in the shrubbery behind the house came up before him, and he had to struggle with himself not to denounce Ralph Fairhoe. Perhaps, as he was an older man, he was weaker than he used to be; but, whatever was the reason for it, he could fight no longer against this secret while he stayed. What his hand had found to do, he had done with as much might as was in him for long, weary years. He could do no more for the land without money, and his own savings had been hardly earned. His account was clear; he would take his daughter by the hand and go forth to some other place—perhaps to another country—where the temptation to disgrace the name of Fairhoe would have no power over him, and where no shadow would fall upon his own name through the daughter who was dearer to him than life, if not than heaven itself. He grew calmer when he had come to this determination; and, after finishing the meal which had been so painfully interrupted, put on his better suit, and, with his overcoat upon his arm, went to meet the afternoon coach that would convey him to London.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. PETIFER.

MRS. PETIFER lived in Deerfoot Lane, City, in the parish of St. Grimes Washpot, in a tall, narrow, rectangular red-brick house, overlooking a dim area of churchyard and a sooty expanse of church.

The churchyard, surrounded by rusty and dislocated iron railings, its mouldy and defaced tombstones leaning in such various directions that it looked as though in some past age a shower of monstrous aëreolites had descended on the spot, where each had stuck immovable just where it fell, was a melancholy place, especially in the drizzly autumn months. The church was a desolate building all the year round, draughty, bare, and cold in winter; blank, sordid, and shadowless in summer; and of that no order of architecture peculiar to city churches.

In the summer time the gaunt, sooty trees, huddled together in a dank corner, put forth a few green leaves of little promise, and a chorus of dusky sparrows twittered from the boughs more hopefully than might have been anticipated. But in autumn, the grass about the graves was rank and coarse; trees and sparrows moulted early; the brown, dry leaves fell, and, mingling with shreds of paper, ends of frayed string, disused corks, and the sweepings of warehouses and packing-case makers' shops, swirled in small, dusty eddies, until they were blown into neglected nooks, where they lay and rotted in the winter rain.

The low door of the sacred edifice itself was so bespattered with mud from the hoofs of horses and the broad wheels of waggons, that the heads of the great nails that studded it were all incrusted with dirt, and six carved cherubs, sitting up aloft over the porch, looking out for fine weather, resembled infant blackamoors weeping inky tears over the wrongs of the unemancipated.

Whatever may have been the general neglect, and the fine old corporation flavour of this ancient city precinct, Mrs. Petifer's house offered a favourable contrast to its neighbours. The very bricks seemed somehow to have kept their colour better than those of the surrounding buildings, while the spotless door-steps and the polished brass knocker were but premonitions of the order of the interior. Everybody who knew, said that Mrs. Petifer's house was as neat as a new pin, and what everybody said was more than proverbially true.

Notwithstanding this opinion, however, and without prejudice to the fact that Mrs. Petifer was an undoubted gentlewoman, and worthy to be the wife of Mr. Petifer, who, besides his situation of trust in the India House, was one of the Court of Assistants of the Honourable Company of Bodkin-makers, whose hall stood in the next street, the inhabitants were a little surprised to see a handsome chariot and pair, driven by a bewigged and liveried coachman, rattle along Deerfoot Lane, and pull up suddenly at Mrs. Petifer's house, before twelve o'clock on the day following that mentioned in the last chapter.

Opinions were divided: Mrs. Blandy, the packing-case maker's wife, thinking that the chairman of the East India Company had called to take Mr. Petifer home to lunch, and that he would be presently seen coming out of the carriage in Eastern magnificence; while Mrs. Hart, the cheesemonger's widow, was certain that the court physician, having heard of Mrs. Petifer's fame as "a seventh of a seventh," had come to fetch her to the palace to prescribe for one of the princesses. Had either of these ladies been skilled in the art of heraldry, they would have known that the device upon the panel of the chariot—that bovine head *sanglant*, with the lance *or*, on a field *vert*, and all the rest of it—made up the crest of the Bullpoints. Those who waited long enough saw Mrs. Fairhoe step out of the carriage and enter the neat, cool, stone-paved hall, attended by her brother Vivian, the diplomatist.

Mrs. Petifer had heard the sound of the carriage-wheels, and at once rang for her maid-servant to show visitors into the front parlour, for she was at that moment seated in her little cosy back breakfast-room, talking to her cousin, Silas Waine. The little woman had a quick instinct, which was sometimes so true and subtle, that it had greatly added to her reputation for those superior powers which were supposed to belong to her by birthright; and she no sooner heard from her cousin the reason of his visit to London, than she began to expect Mrs. Fairhoe. Silas had been to see her late on the previous night, when she and her husband (a courtly, grey-headed gentleman, dressed in black, and with an immaculate cambric shirt-frill), were just sitting down to their favourite supper of lamb's fry.

Mr. Petifer was politely shocked, and courteously grieved, and mildly indignant, when he heard the steward's account of the matter; for the old gentleman had a true affection for little Barbara. Mrs. Petifer was smartly angry at the implied insult to the Waine and Petifer families, and was also not a little self-reproachful at the way in which she had concealed all this love-making business from her cousin; but she said very little on the subject that night, being more careful to give her kinsman his supper, and to send him off to a comfortable lodging in the next street, with strict injunctions to return to breakfast in the morning.

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe sent in her card, and took a seat in an easy chair. Mr. Vivian Bullpoint stuck a glass into his eye, and began to criticise the two or three old paintings on the walls, while waiting for the appearance of the mistress of the house.

She came in, looking so fresh and bright in her soft stuff dress, and cap and kerchief of snowy muslin; and there was such a conscious dignity in her small erect figure, and even in her sparkling, merry, candid eyes, that Mrs. Fairhoe instincvely rose, and for a moment felt a little difficulty in opening the conversation. She had come prepared to encounter a common person, and found herself face to face with a lady considerably her senior, and evidently accustomed to hold her own.

"I regret that Mr. Petifer is out, madam," said the old lady, making a sweeping curtsey, in which she included the diplomatist, whose glass had somehow frozen into his eye; "but, that I may save you some trouble, it is as well to say that I can divine the purpose of your visit."

Mrs. Fairhoe was taken further aback; the diplomatist struck in effectively—leaning with his hand upon the table, in quite a House of Commons manner—"Well, egad! yes, possibly. You see, this, madam, is a most unfortunate and unlooked-for piece of business, and doubtless you can, you know—egad! perfectly understand the feelings of the family. Your evident position, madam, would, I should say—excuse me—but, egad!—enable you quite to estimate that—ar—um—sort of thing to—I might say, egad!—to a nicety."

"I beg your pardon, madam," said Mrs. Petifer, inclining a little to her lady visitor, but bestowing a bird-like glance at the gentleman, whom she indicated with her little plump white hand, "but this gentleman is, if I am not mistaken——"

"My brother, Mr. Vivian Bullpoint," replied Mrs. Fairhoe.

"Oh, very much gratified at the introduction, I am sure. The Bullpoint family is not unknown to me by reputation; first baronet of Charles II.'s creation, if I am not mistaken. You, sir, are a younger son, no doubt?"

Both visitors were aghast. Here was an old-fashioned, plump, bright, little elderly lady, living in a tidy house in a dingy quarter of the city, giving herself the airs of a marchioness, at the very least. But she went on, quite undisturbed by the consternation in their faces:—

"You were good enough to say that I could probably understand this unfortunate piece of business. Pray be seated. You mean, I presume, that the young gentleman, your nephew, has not conducted himself towards the child, my second cousin, with that honour which one would have expected from the heir of the Fairhoes and the relative of the Bullpoints?"

This was really too much. But what was to be done? Was there really any occult power in this little woman, which enabled her to baffle all the trained hauteur and official diplomacy which they had intended to exercise upon her. Vivian Bullpoint's glass thawed out of his eye, and he opened his mouth to speak, but as he could only say "Egad!" thought better of it, and yielded to his sister, who was pale with anger and shame.

"You do not really mean," she said, at last, rising and speaking with cold deliberation, "to suggest that your cousin, Barbara Waine, my steward's daughter, ever—even though some childish love-passages may have happened between them without my knowledge—really contemplated becoming Oswald Fairhoe's wife?"

"You put it plainly, madam; pardon me for asking a question in return. During the progress of those love-passages to which you allude, childish as they may have been when the parties to them were children, but which — though they were unknown to my cousin, your steward — have been known to me for some time past — if Barbara Waine did not look forward to the probability of one day becoming Mrs. Oswald Fairhoe, to what *did* she look forward?"

The diplomatist struck in again, "Egad! dear me; but, you know, you shouldn't ask such questions, you see; it's not for you to ask questions, it's for us; because, of course, this sort of thing, egad! can't, of course, be expected to go on."

Mrs. Fairhoe silenced him impatiently, and with a flushed face turned to Mrs. Petifer. "You say you knew of this, and yet you suffered it to go on without informing me?"

"I suffered it to go on without informing Silas Waine, which is more to the purpose. It was the young man's duty to do that himself, when he was in daily communication with him; but I offered to pay a visit to Fairhoe, in order to place the matter before you. Mr. Oswald declined to accept my intervention, and as I had only discovered, and had not been made the confidante, of these love-passages, I let it rest till he thought it desirable to avow them."

"Very considerate of you. And you really were under the impression that an alliance would be brought about between my son and his steward's daughter?

On my word, madam, you do us infinite honour; but I should suggest that your suppositions were scarcely reasonable."

She tried to sneer, but failed; that haughty, imperious face, in some inexplicable way, really drooped before the bright, searching, steady gaze of the eyes that looked her through. She felt mean, somehow, in all her pride, before that little upright figure.

Mrs. Petifer laughed—a strange, ringing, contemptuous, suggestive laugh, that few people could have given her credit for. "On *your* word," she said, with scornful emphasis. "Is that the word of a Fairhoe, and has its value descended to your son? Your steward's daughter, you may please to remember, is related by blood to the race you are so proud of. And though Silas Waine became a servant, to extinguish the debt he owed to Oswald Fairhoe's godless, griping grandfather, his family—*our* family—were no beggars, and might show a reputation as unsullied as the Bullpoints, even when they were allied to the Fairhoes."

The diplomatist was speechless. He could only tug at his whisker and say "Egad!" softly to himself. Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe recovered a little, and, following her lady-like instincts, put down her rage with a great effort.

"You misunderstand me partly, I think," she said. "I meant to spare the girl, and to spare her father what may be a great and bitter pain, originating in this foolish, boyish liking of my son. You may at least understand that I have other views for him; that he must not and cannot be bound by any engagement of this kind, even if there be one; that—that—I would almost as soon see him dead as make such an alliance under present circumstances, though I deny nothing that you have said as to your own claims. I came here before it was too late, to ask you to help me to put it before the girl herself, and she will soon forget the past; surely it can never have been very serious. As to her father, doubtless he will see how desirable it is to remove to some other appointment which my brother's influence may obtain for him."

"If you suppose that Silas Waine would have remained for a single day at Fairhoe, knowing what you now know, you have mistaken him," said Mrs. Petifer, quietly; "but I would warn you not to speak of this matter to him as you have spoken of it to me. Heaven send that his bonnie daughter may be able, as you say, to forget it! Her father never will. And I may tell you more, madam—he will never be indebted to the man who has brought this sorrow on him and her; foolish, childish as it may be. He would see her dead, as you would see your son, before he stooped so low as to commend her to Oswald Fairhoe for a wife."

"Now, really, you see, egad," said Vivian Bullpoint, who had recovered himself sufficiently to strike in again, "these things must be properly managed; and I should propose, though it's a deuced unpleasant sort of business, that I should go quietly down to Fairhoe and talk to this man."

"Oh, you needn't take that trouble," replied Mrs.

Petifer, turning upon him so briskly that he collapsed again; "he is only in the next room, and I can call him in at once."

"Does he know of this, then?" said Mrs. Fairhoe, anxiously; "and is the—is his daughter with him? She stays with you in town, I understood."

"He heard of it all for the first time two days ago, and from the same person who gave you information, no doubt—from your waiting-woman."

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe looked surprised and perplexed. "From Mittens?" she said, excitedly. "Impossible."

"From your waiting-woman—whatever may be her name, madam. She has been playing the spy to some purpose. It would have been better if she had spoken sooner."

Mrs. Fairhoe, lost in gloomy thought, seemed not to hear this retort; or rather, she put it away from her, and moved towards the door, but came back again before her hand reached the lock.

"There is no time for apologies, however many I may owe you," she said, bowing low to Mrs. Petifer; "but I must ask one favour of you. Tell Mr. Waine that I am here, and ask him to see me for a few minutes alone."

"Really—you know. Egad—don't," interrupted the diplomatist.

"If Mrs. Petifer will do me this favour," she resumed, without heeding him, "she may trust me to remember that I am a lady, and that I know what is due to another lady in her own house. If I see Mr.

Waine, I shall speak to him, not as the steward of Fairhoe, but as Mrs. Petifer's kinsman."

There was no resisting so lofty a compliment, whatever sting might have been hidden by it. The old lady bowed with wonderful stateliness; but, do what she would, a smile, in which there was a flicker of triumph, lit her face as she left the room, and it was there when she returned to say that Silas Waine waited Mrs. Fairhoe's pleasure. He was standing up, dark and grim, but with a troubled look upon his pale grey face; and, though he moved to close the door, and to hand her a chair, he went back to the place beside the chimneypiece, against which he was leaning when his mistress entered. He bowed his head for her to speak.

"Mr. Waine," she said, looking up at him with an imploring glance, which she saw had all its intended effect, "I need scarcely tell you what pain it gives me to be compelled to enter upon the business that has brought me here. Surely there is no need to enter upon it. You know, perhaps, as well as I know, how impossible it is that there should be any other end to it, than that the foolish, romantic fancies of this boy and girl should be put a stop to. You would never encourage it, I am sure."

"I am here to put an end to it. Not half an hour after that woman told me that such a calamity hung over me and mine I was on the road to London. I am going now to seek my girl at the schoolfellow's house where she is staying, and, if I can will it so, you will see neither of us again. Oh! madam, madam, it was unworthy of you and the name you bear to set such a spy upon her."

"I—I set anybody to spy upon your daughter!" said his mistress, with her eyes aflame. "How dare you say so? I knew nothing of her, and heard no word of this till I was informed of it, not a week ago, by a person with whom you can have nothing to do."

"How much have you learned, then? I have a right to ask that of you. What does this informer tell you that you may not tell to me? You need not fear, madam," he continued, with a savage energy that yet scarcely raised his voice above a whisper. "You cannot be more anxious to be quit of us than I am to save my child from the contamination of your race, if I rightly guess that informer's name."

"This can do no good," she replied, with the same imploring look. "I wish to save her pain, if not disgrace, and you take advantage of my desire to insult the family of which you were once the servant. I tell you that the recollection of this mere childish passion will die out before a year is past. Let me know what I can do for you, and command my best services in return for your faithful stewardship. There must be no farewell between your daughter and my son. Let us spare them both. They are only dreaming."

"Heaven grant that there may be no bitter waking to my darling, then," said Silas, as he opened the door and bowed his mistress out. "I say farewell for both of us, madam; but"—and here he spoke under some fierce and sudden impulse—" be warned against

Ralph Fairhoe; and, if he be a friend of yours, watch him, as my child has been watched; it will be an evil day for one of us if he and I should meet again."

She felt, somehow, that he dismissed her; there was something of such sterling dignity in his manner that her proud bearing shrunk to littleness beside his rugged, earnest look. By a sudden impulse, which was only the remembrance of the part she had schooled herself to play, she turned and took his hand.

He grasped it, drew it within his arm, and so led her into the room where his cousin and Vivian Bullpoint were waiting.

The diplomatist sank into a chair, ejaculating "Egad!" at intervals, like the shots of a minute-gun.

"You see that I have redeemed my promise," said Mrs. Fairhoe, turning to Mrs. Petifer. "Your cousin sees my difficulty. I only wish we had either of us known of this before."

"I should willingly have acquainted you, madam, if your son had not forbidden it," replied the old lady, looking uneasily at Silas.

"You did ill to keep the matter from me, cousin," said he; "but I have one duty to do now, and I must say farewell to Mrs. Fairhoe, for, with my own will, I shall never cross the threshold of her house again. If I do, it will be only to bring disgrace and evil upon the name of which she is so proud."

Mrs. Petifer looked at him in dismay. "What do you mean, Silas Waine?" she said. "Who would be disgraced by such an alliance? Good God!" said the little woman, losing her temper all of a sudden, "what have the Fairhoes ever been in this world that they should give themselves these airs? And as for the Bullpoints, why, unless report belies them, they were but carcase-butchers before the restoration of Charles the Second, and their ancestor hid the young prince in his slaughter-house, which was very proper, no doubt, but nothing heroic."

"You mistake me altogether," said the steward. "The disgrace to the Fairhoes would be from themselves, and I must go from their place before I am tempted beyond my strength, or I shall denounce the man who hoped to be the heir. This temptation has been a scourge, driving me away for many a bitter month, and, as that was too light, the Lord has sent me another trouble to overweight it. Madam, I bid you farewell, and may no grief come upon your heart such as your son has made to rend mine this day."

There was something so still, and yet so full of a suppressed force about the way in which he spoke, that his words seemed to take the form of a dark prophecy, and even Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe was impressed by them. She was pale and almost trembling when she offered him her hand, and then, saying only, "I am deeply, bitterly sorry," beckoned to her brother, bowed profoundly to Mrs. Petifer, and left the house.

"I must go now and look for my daughter," said Silas Waine to his cousin, after the sound of the wheels had ceased in the quiet streets. "We may never see your face again," he added, taking both her hands in his, as the great tears rolled down his face, and his pent-up feelings burst forth in silent sobs that shook his square frame. "We may never see your face again, for I must take my lamb into another fold far hence." It must have been the pent-up grief and heartache of many long, weary weeks, which could burst out in such a torrent now, and it was the more terrible, inasmuch as he fought sternly against the relief it gave him. Mrs. Petifer dropped into a chair and fainted for the first time in her life; and when Silas called for assistance, the servant brought in a letter, in the address of which he recognised his daughter's writing. It took a long while to bring Mrs. Petifer to her senses, but when once she was brought to them, wherever they were, she was ready with help and assistance. The letter was from Barbara, simply saying that she was going home that day (which meant the day before), and that, as she had been already nine weeks at her schoolfellow's, and more than three months in London, she would not stay to bid her kinswoman good-bye.

CHAPTER VIII.

SENT ADRIFT.

Sergeant Robert Cobbold, having been on a visit to the War Office, had made up his mind to take a holiday, and, having nowhere in particular to go, thought he would run down and see Oswald, and spend perhaps an hour or two with Master Silas Waine, for whom he had safely stowed away in the breast of his military undress-coat a paper of some particularly choice Virginia tobacco, for he knew that the old man was a little lonely now sometimes, when his daughter Barbara was away. And time had told upon the honest soldier, too, who, though he had neither wife nor child of his own, and, indeed, little else to trouble him, began to show the scars of some of those wounds that Time had dealt him, though, like a brave soldier, he never turned his back even on Time himself, but faced him valiantly, and took all he had to give him, like a man.

It was on the same morning which had dawned so brightly after the heavy rain, when the accusing sunlight shone in upon Oswald Fairhoe after his mother's warning. The London streets were as fresh and radiant as it is consistent for London streets to be. At the old coach-office in Aldgate the very waiters at the tavern cheered up a bit in the little frowsy dens where they washed glasses and stored scraps of strong cheese and dry biscuits. Looking over this partition, at the bright gleam of sunshine coming through the dingy window and reflected on the sticky rings that had been made by last night's tumblers on the bare mahogany tables, the head waiter looked like a miserable clerical criminal, who had been suddenly brought into court and placed in the dock before the arrival of the jury.

There were only two other persons in the room at the time, for it was so much more lively outside that most of the passengers intending to go by the early morning coach were lounging about the stable-yard, or watching the cattle and the hay-carts coming up to the market and the butchers' shambles opposite. The very Jew boys, with dummy lead-pencils and parboiled oranges, were, if possible, more than usually brisk, and the horses snorted and whinnied as they came out of their close stables to sniff the pure fresh air.

The coachman and the guard were sitting in "the tap," both entirely absorbed in devotion to a round of cold boiled beef, a new cottage loaf, and a large jug of ale, from which they were only aroused by the announcement of the ostler that the horses were put to.

"Now, Miss, if you please," said the coachman, putting his head into the coffee-room and addressing one of the persons present; "we're on'y a waitin' for you. Leastways, there ain't no other insides, and so you'll have it all to yourself, quite reg'lar. You ain't a goin', Mum, I think?" he added, turning to the elder of the two women.

"No; I am not," said that individual; "only this young lady and the little one, which I hope the straw and the inside and that ain't damp, as is apt for to give people their death through the carelessness of ostlers and sech."

"All right, Mum; if you'd ha' sent word afore you come we'd ha' had a patent stove fixed; but it's dry enough, I'll wager." He was eying the younger woman rather curiously, for he had called her "Miss," and now she had a baby in her arms, which had all along been hidden under the capacious cloak of her companion, and the coachman (who was the father of a family) could tell by the way she held the little creature that it was her own.

"Well, keep your sperrits up, my dear," said the elder lady; "I'll bring the little basket, and you know what I told you about the bottle. It's always best for 'em to sleep on a journey, which hevin send it may be a prosprous one to you and to him—a pretty lamb. Good-bye! good-bye!" and the dame kissed the tiny, unconscious infant that lay all warm and flushed in a flannel hood. She would have kissed the mother, but that her face was covered with a veil so thick that the coachman could not distinctly see her features, though he could tell easily enough that she was crying bitterly.

The same observation was made by Sergeant Robert

Cobbold, as he stood by the coach-door, just ready to mount up to his seat on the box; but there was more than that to arrest his attention. The veil was drawn aside for a moment, and he caught a glimpse of the girl's face—a fair, pale, sorrowful, beautiful face, which he could, he thought, have sworn to amongst a million of other faces. He paused, with his foot upon the iron step, and hesitated for a moment, as though he had changed his mind and was about to speak to the inside passenger; but he saw that she was sitting back, caressing the child that lay in her arms; and, the coachman laughingly asking him if he'd forgotten anything, he climbed slowly into his seat.

"I'd stake my life on its being her, too," he said to himself. "Good Heaven! she can't have come to any harm, surely. I wonder whether she has a sister in London, and if it's only a close likeness. I must inquire before I go and see the old man."

"Ah!" said the coachman, who guessed what he was muttering about, but had no suspicion of his personal interest in the matter. "She is a young-lookin' creetur to have a little 'un, aint she? I don't, somehow, like the looks on it. I wonder where the father is—the father of either on 'em, for that matter; for they aint much more than a pair o' infants, the two on 'em aint; are they, now?"

Sergeant Cobbold made some incoherent reply, and then relapsed into a long silence, out of which he came by a great effort, and only for the sake of saving appearances. He was convinced that the girl, who was the only inside passenger, was Barbara Waine; and yet, as he had only seen her for a moment, he endeavoured to cherish a feeling of uncertainty. Whenever the coach stopped, he watched for her getting out (he had too much delicacy to look in at the window); but she remained inside; and the coachman informed him that she still wore the thick black veil, which was gathered in heavy folds and tied beneath her chin.

After his mother's departure, Oswald Fairhoe had sat for the greater part of the day in his room, looking out, wistfully, and with a face full of anxious care, at the trim garden, and listening to the tapping of the leaves and stems against his window-panes. He sat listening to this, and making a sort of monotonous mental tune out of it, although it irritated him. He was in just that frame of mind which makes it quite a matter of indifference whether any sound irritates or soothes, and yet he was uneasy; and, as the afternoon wore on, he rose two or three times, and walked down to the edge of the wood to look across the country. Once he rang for his horse to be got ready; but before the message was taken to the groom countermanded it, and went to the stable himself. He turned out into the road, however, and walked some distance towards Fairhoe village; until he came to the stile which led into a green lane across the meadows.

He had received a letter in the morning which had stricken out of him what little life and energy he had left from the previous night. It was only a little note, directed in a delicate, trembling hand; and he had taken it in himself when the postman came across with the letter-bag, just before breakfast. It was from Barbara, telling him that she was in daily fear of discovery; how, as he well knew, she had deceived both her cousin and the schoolfellow with whom she was supposed to be staying, and now dreaded her father's appearance; how, after paying for the lodging where her baby had been born, and giving her last sovereign to the nurse, she would have little more than the coach fare to the town beyond Grundon; and finally how, at all risks, she would, by the time he received that letter, have started for Fairhoe with her child.

He read this message in an agony of fear and self-reproach; but he had little opportunity to think over it before Ralph Fairhoe was announced as having called to see his sister-in-law. The rites of hospitality demanded that he should be invited to take lunch, and they sat down together for what seemed to Oswald dreary hours, but was, in reality, just three-quarters of an hour, during which the uncle was fencing about in the effort to discover whether the nephew was acquainted with the fact of his having been Mrs. Fairhoe's informant—an effort wholly frustrated by Oswald's moody pre-occupation, which left the hints of his companion without response.

Only one remark made by his guest served for a moment to rouse him to interest. "I called at the cottage as I came along, and I hear that Master Waine has gone off to London, too. What can the old fellow want in town, I wonder, unless he has gone to look after his daughter?"

Oswald flushed, and then turned paler than before.

"Ah, you dog! you dog!" said Ralph, trying to assume an artfully bantering, good-humoured air; "I'm afraid that young person wants looking after at Fairhoe as well as in town. You must be careful, Oswald; you really must, my dear boy. A pretty face, you know, is all very well; but young fellows shouldn't, you know, be——ah! well, it's no use for me to talk now, I'll be bound. Come, make a clean breast of it, if that's what makes you so confoundedly gloomy. Begad, I've had some affairs of that sort in my own time; nothing improper, of course; but sentimental, you know, and all that sort of thing. Come! there *is* a little danger to one of you when pretty little Barbara Waine is at home, isn't there?"

There was something so inexpressibly offensive to Oswald in this sort of talk from a man so unlike himself, that his fair brow grew almost as dark and lowering as Ralph's own. He rose from the table, and faced his uncle angrily. "Sir," he said, clenching his hands behind his back, "it is a subject too delicate to jest about, no matter what view you may take of it. Whatever may have been the way of regarding such matters in your youth, I hope and believe that they are treated differently now. They are so by me, at all events; and I must entreat you to refrain from coupling any young lady's name with mine."

"Why, good God!" retorted Ralph; "it's my name, too, isn't it? You never supposed I meant any accusation; or, if it comes to that, any offence against my brother's son? You've quite mistaken me, I assure you, my dear fellow. Egad! you never thought I meant really to couple your name with your steward's daughter in any way but in a jest, for which I am of course sorry. Damn it! I beg your pardon—there!"

Now, this speech was worse than the first, but Oswald's first retort had been stilted and forced, because it proceeded more from a consciousness of what he *ought* to be able to say than from what he really *could* say. Had he been prepared to face the world and claim Barbara Waine as his wife, in defiance of his mother, of her father, of probable social neglect and pecuniary ruin, even he might have been dignified, angry, and full of virtuous indignation; but, before this half-formed determination could blossom into the least sign of action, it was blighted by his inherent weakness and cowardliness—nay, blighted even by the recollection of the lengths of meanness and concealment of which he had been already guilty.

Feeling this in a few moments of acute torture, he met Ralph's assurances with a bitter laugh, and passively accepted his proffered hand; but he experienced sensible relief when he shortly took his leave—relief still greater when half an hour afterwards, and still looking out of the window of the dining-room, he saw Miss Mittens, fully dressed, go out and take the road to Grundon.

Oh, could he but have gathered courage then and there from all those self-accusations with which he mentally belaboured himself! But courage is not generally gained by self-accusation, or even by self-dissection; and, as has been already said, he was in a condition of mental paralysis by the time that the glory of the autumn afternoon had deepened into dusk. He stopped for a moment at the stile which he had reached in his walk, and, leaning against it, removed his hat that the cool air might play about his temples, for he felt benumbed in body and brain, and was deaf and blind to the ordinary sounds and sights of that quiet country place.

This may have been the reason that he was unconscious of the approach of two persons whose footsteps and voices might have been heard as they came along the path together. But the sharp eyes of one of them saw him before they reached the stile, and their conversation had stopped when they came up with him. They were Sergeant Robert Cobbold and Marian Rooke, for the worthy soldier who got off the coach at Fairhoe had overtaken the market-woman on his way, and told her (knowing of old how close an interest she had in Barbara Waine) how the girl with the infant in her arms (and he could almost swear to the steward's daughter by that one glimpse of her face) had got down in a by-road a mile or more from the village.

Marian kept her own counsel, for the blunt, unsuspicious sergeant had no notion that Oswald Fairhoe had aught to do with the story he was telling. He was anxious to know whether Barbara was married, or how it happened that she was travelling alone with a baby not many weeks old, as even the bachelor Robert Cobbold could see, and with the evident purpose of concealment. But when the market-woman drew Oswald Fairhoe aside, and began to talk to him in a low, excited voice, to which he replied by covering his face with his hands as he leaned upon the stile, the sergeant began to suspect something of the truth. For a moment, as he kept back under the pretence of cutting a stick from the hedge, but in reality growling a military oath or two and grinding his teeth, he felt as though he could have shot Oswald where he stood. That poor innocent child; the gloomy old father, of which she was the one ewe lamb, as he would call her in his scriptural references; he himself the old friend and companion of all three. Perhaps it would be better if somebody would just shoot them all. For his part, he would have gone out at a moment's notice, single-handed, to meet a whole battalion of French, rather than have had this happen.

Oswald Fairhoe came to him presently, and held out his hand. "Marian Rooke has told me that you know of this sad business," he said. "I implore you to keep our secret."

"I must first know what secret it is to keep," said Cobbold, grimly, and with his hand behind his back. "If you've wronged Barbara Waine, I'll be no party to it. I'm a blunt fellow enough, Master Oswald, and I love your father, sir; but I'm damned if I can bear this, even from his son. Will you make matters right? If not, good-bye; and you'll never see Robert Cobbold again in this world, and I hope not in the next, neither."

"I promise to satisfy you in every way possible. Come with me to the house now, for I have a service to ask of you; and, unless I am mistaken, Barbara will be there to-night."

So he took the sergeant's arm, and they walked back together, Marian Rooke having gone before; but the grim expression had scarcely relaxed upon the soldier's face even when he was comfortably engaged over a late dinner and a glass of cold grog, and his heart felt heavier than it had been for many a day.

Barbara—for it was she who had been the inside passenger of the coach which had brought Robert Cobbold from London—got out on the high road some three miles from her destination, intending, as far as, in her half-dreamy and wretched condition, she could have any settled purpose, to walk across the fields, and so, by certain by-paths through the woods (if she could but trace them), to reach Fairhoe after nightfall. The most terrible part of all the heavy burden that lay upon her was the thought that the little unconscious creature now lying asleep in her weary arms was at once her great comfort and the evidence of her overwhelming misery. How often, in that dull London lodging, as she sat, weak and almost despairing, beside the white bed, she would hang over that little face peeping out from amidst swelling billows of bolster and counterpane, till her hot tears fell upon it and wakened such lusty cries, that she seized the coveted opportunity of hushing its owner to sleep again. How she would sometimes strain the little soft, winsome fellow to her breast, and try to teach him the meaning of that unutterable, but most intelligible language which is a part of the maternal instinct—the expression of a feeling far too deep for recognised words and phrases. Was there a still more terrible instinct beneath this? Did she foresee with a dumb agony, which was worse than mere pain, that they must part—that this one living link that bound her to a possible joy must be cut away from her for ever?

There was but one end to it all that she could see. No earthly power could move the stony pride of Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, who, from all that she could learn, held her son's destiny in her hands until he could free himself from the fetters that bound him to his family name and to the heritage of his father. That he would do this who could doubt, if only they had heard the protestations of his love for her, and had seen him kneeling at her feet pouring out his whole wealth of passion, and entreating her to be patient with him in his weakness, that he might choose the opportunity which should be for the happiness of them both? That opportunity would be long in coming, she feared. Oh! how long? And what would become of her in the interval? She dared not tell her father now. The time was past for that. How could she bow down that old grey head with grief? How confess to the stern, dark, sorrowful man, who had lavished all the love of his stricken heart upon her and made her every childish trouble his deep concern, that she had practised a long course of deception; had abused the trust, and freedom, and loving confidence which he accorded to her alone of all the world? How dare she tell him that she had been in lodgings through all the time of her trial, when he had believed that she was passing a mere schoolgirl holiday with her playmates? Above all, she could not dare to rouse that anger which so fiercely guarded his pride by any confession such as she had to make—his pride, more stern and inflexible, even, than that of any of the race of Fairhoe—a pride that had been hardened by that slumbering resentment which the Israelites might have felt when they were taken captive and had to do thankless service.

No wonder that these thoughts, all confused and mingled with other and even darker fancies, came upon her as she stood after she had left the coach, waiting for it to disappear at a turn of the road, that she might sit down for a moment by the wayside and loosen her thick veil for the air to blow upon her hot, flushed face. She must have fallen asleep or fainted, she thought; for, although she seemed only to have closed her eyes for a moment, the night had begun to set in before she opened them again. Indeed, it was only the wailing of her infant which appeared to waken her; and, with a sense of fear and feverish haste, and a rush of broken, undefined thoughts, that seemed perpetually recurring but leading no whither, she clasped him more closely to her breast, and turned into a footpath across the fields.

The autumn mists came up from the low-lying lands and hung upon the meadows; the air was moist and stifling, and the fitful breeze which now and then stirred the trees came in warm gushes, in which there seemed little of refreshment; but she was beyond attending to the signs of the weather, and passed on as fast as her feeble feet could go, until, at a bend of the path, she came upon a little coppice, and so to a broad reedy flat, where the river gurgled in a shallow stream.

There was a fascination in the sound which led her on towards the brink, just where she could see the water from a high bank and watch it flow by. There was something so soothing in its monotonous plash, and the green weeds and rushes waving there in its pebbly bed looked so fresh and cool; how pleasant it would be to reach them, and bathe her hot forehead in the stream; how much pleasanter still to let it ripple over her, and so assuage this burning fever in her limbs? If—if—oh! why should she be separated from her little one? Would that they could both go together to that world where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

She had no distinct thought or intention in so doing, and her reflections seemed to possess no coherence; as she crept down nearer to the river, and, with the child still in her arms, began to descend the steep bank; but her head was reeling, and she stumbled, fell heavily, and rolled, stunned and senseless, down to the very brink amongst the weeds.

"What the devil are you about there, Rory?" said a man's voice, in a low tone, from the other side of the stream. "Dang'd if you haven't smashed one of the eel-pots or something; or is it Neddy coming out of the wood? Dang his hide! if I don't pay him with a wattle when we come back!"

"Come over here, Gaffer; come over here!" said a young fellow, starting up from close beneath the bank where Barbara had fallen; "and be quick about it, too! Here's a woman been goin' to drownd herself; and"—here he gave a long whistle—"if it ben't th' old steward's daughter, too! We must go on at once to Fairhoe and seek the squire."

The speaker was no other than that gipsy youth who had lamed Ralph Fairhoe's horse at the Load of Hay, and to whom Marion had given the ring; and he was presently joined by Gaffer, the owner of the light pony-cart, who had been down to the river for eels, and now came wading across with a creelful on his arm.

They took the child, who was squalling lustily, out of her arms, and tried to revive her by bathing her face and head with water; at length she opened her eyes, and stared round her wildly.

Gaffer gave her back the child, and, diving into a side pocket, produced a flat bottle, which he put to her lips; but the liquor was too pungent and fiery, and she shrunk from it until Rory had made a cup of a great leaf, and, mingling some of the spirit with water, pressed her to drink. "For we must take you right away to Fairhoe, through the back wood," said he, "and while Gaffer leads you up to the big house, I'll seek Marion Rooke; she be there, I know, and will tell us what to do."

She was so faint and feeble that she suffered them to lead her up the bank to the light covered cart, where she was placed on a heap of fresh clean straw beneath the tilt; while Gaffer and Rory sat in front with their creel of eels upon the shafts, and drove to Fairhoe at the best pace that Neddy could be induced to make after his long day's work.

There was some distance to walk even when they had drawn up beside the bridle-road that led into the dwarf wood behind the old house; and while Rory set off like a hare to find Marion, Gaffer led the pony to the hedgeside, and lighted his pipe, of which he had scarcely enjoyed the first six fragrant whiffs when he heard somebody bursting through the hedge lower down, and presently Oswald Fairhoe came out into the path and ran up to him almost breathless.

"Which way have you come to-night?" he said, in an excited tone; "tell me quickly, for God's sake, whether you have seen a young woman carrying a baby upon the road, and if so, whereabouts you left her?"

Old Gaffer was slow and steady, but he was a man of action; he took one long pull at his pipe, blew out a great wraith of smoke from one side of his mouth, and then, striding in his long river-boots to the cart, lifted up the corner of the tilt under which Barbara was lying. "That's the woman you're looking after, or I'm mistaken," he said, in his half-gipsy dialect; "but, mind ye," he added, laying his great brown paw upon Oswald's arm, "you'll hold me harmless; and if any hurt comes to her, you'll have them to answer to that don't forget and don't forgive easy."

Oswald scarcely heeded these words, for Barbara had heard his voice and was struggling to the ground. He had her in his arms in a moment, and with no other answer than a great sob to his entreaties to come on to the house at once, let him take the infant from her, and leaning on his shoulder, turned into the coppice.

Who shall say what upbraidings, what explanations, what words of bitter sorrow and almost bitter love, passed in that bare, quiet room, which he called his own, and to which he led her?

He himself went out softly, and brought her wine and food, and chafed her cold feet, and bathed her burning temples with choice essences, for which he ransacked his mother's boudoir; but with all she was in a sort of dull, feverish stupor. She felt somehow under the sense of a premeditated, but frustrated crime, and yet memory would carry her clearly no further than that vague attempt to creep down to the river, the ripple of which seemed still to be singing a reproachful dirge in her ears.

Amid all her grief, and reproaches, and sorrow, and love, and deep repentance, this was present with her, and she felt, if possible, more powerless than ever against the dread necessity which must, for a time at least, sever her from her child; for such time as their secret must be kept—that was all. Oswald himself must tell that secret when he could claim her before the world in his own lawful right, or nothing but sorrow could come of it.

It was already late when Oswald went once more into the hall to seek for Marion, if she had yet returned from the same quest which had taken him out more than two hours before.

She was standing there, talking to Rory, whom she now dismissed, softly closing the door after him.

"You have found her, I hear," said the market-woman, gloomily. "Of what use can I be now, and what is to become of the child? *Your* child, you will remember," she added, significantly.

"My child!" he said, repeating the words almost mechanically, and, coming forward into the light of the dim lamp that hung above the arch of the staircase, she saw that he carried a bundle in his arms—a living bundle—which began to wail as he held it out to her.

"For Heaven's sake, take the little one, and find—as I know you can if you will—some safe refuge for him till his mother can reclaim him," he said. "Nay, I swear to you," he added, vehemently, as she drew back, "that in good time she shall be my wife before them all as she now is before Heaven. If you refuse, it will kill her, and then—then, God help me! I shall kill myself. Have pity on us, Marion; I dare not offer you rewards, I know that full well; but I ask you, for love of her, to take her child and cherish it only for a little time."

"Only for a little time—oh, only for a little time!" said a voice close by, a voice so changed, and so low and plaintive, that neither of them knew it. It was Barbara, who, with her hair and dress all dishevelled, her face dead white, her great blue eyes wide and staring, had stolen out of the room, and now stood beside him. "Only for a little time! Only for a little time!" It was like the chant that the rippling river sung—so low and melancholy, and, oh! so like a death song.

"Do you wish me to take care of your child, then? Must you be parted from him?" said Marion, holding out her arms for the infant and covering his face with her cape. "It cannot be for long, then, Barbara. You know well what you say, do you?"

"Yes," she replied, eagerly; "Oswald will do all that he has promised: it will be only for a little time." And, with this sad refrain, she bent her head down upon that tiny face; and the tears that would relieve her beating brain began to flow afresh.

"I must go to Grundon, then. So, Mr. Fairhoe, be good enough to have a horse put to, and the lad who was here just now can drive me. You will find him outside. Take him with you to the stable, and let him meet me with the chaise in the road beyond the bend past the home meadow. We must keep away from prying eyes and ears. I will come back for you, birdie," she said to Barbara, when he had taken the stable key from a hook, and had left them together, "for I must stay at your house to-night, and you will want somebody by when your father returns—if you are able to be up to meet him; and even that I doubt, unless I doctor you."

And so Sergeant Cobbold, who was walking up and down in the road in front, smoking his military pipe, and stepping as though he were on guard with an outlying picket, saw the chaise drive away and return with Marion, and stayed there under the moon until he watched the two women go together in the direction of the steward's cottage. The worthy sergeant could make nothing of it, and had begun to grind his teeth again, when Oswald came out to him, and asked him for the support of his arm, that he might walk for half an hour across the fields. He went with him at once, and listened to much incoherent talk that night —to talk which grew more and more incoherent as the dew began to fall and all the world had retired into shadow. He could feel that Oswald shivered as he leaned upon his arm, and yet the hand that he touched, in entreating him to turn homeward and go to bed, burnt with a dry feverish heat. There was no time to be lost, and the worthy soldier fairly dragged his companion back to the house, and helped him to undress. In another hour he had found the groom, and sent him at full gallop to fetch the doctor from Grundon. Oswald was in a high fever.

It may have been owing to Marion's presence, or to the virtues of a brew of what the French call *tisane*, which that faithful friend had insisted on administering; or to that physical weakness under which she was suffering, and which left no hold for violent disease, that Barbara was not tossing in the restlessness of fever too. As it was, she lay in a sort of sleep which was half stupor, from which she started now and then, moaning feebly and putting out her hand to feel for some living presence. The woman-servant had gone home for the night, and Marion sat beside the bed, ready to take that poor, thin, white hand in hers whenever it was held out in this half-conscious manner. She heard the hoofs of the horse that carried the servant to the town, and guessed what was the matter. In the grey morning she went and opened the window to let in the fresh air, and, looking towards the road, saw the doctor going back, slowly and thoughtfully. As he pulled up where he could see the cottage, and seemed to be trying to find out whether anybody was astir, she slipped down and softly opened the door, beckoning to him to come along the lane leading to the garden fence. The doctor, who had been the apprentice, and was the immediate successor, of him who had attended the old squire, knew Marion very well, and, in spite of his habitual taciturnity, had often laughed and chatted with her about her herbal remedies—some of which, by-the-bye, he had adopted very successfully in his own practice. He was more than usually grave and silent now, and, indeed, dismounted and stood with his arm over his horse's neck before he said "Good-morning."

"You have a patient there, too, haven't you?" he said, at last, motioning towards the upper window. "How is she?"

"I don't think she will be much worse than she is now, if she can only have this sleep out; but I wish you'd come up and see her. Nay, you needn't tell me," she added, interrupting him as he was about to speak; "I see you've somehow learnt enough about this matter to make it safe for me to ask you, did *he* tell you?"

"Yes, and no. That is, he has been what you call light-headed; and I heartily wish he'd had a jorum of your herb-tea before I was sent for, for I have heard what I've no wish to know, especially as I'm bound in honour not to mention it, since I can't decide how much is fact and how much is fever. Is Waine here?"

"No, but he's expected; and I needn't tell *you*, surely, that he mustn't know a word of what you've heard; nothing but mischief could come of it, just now. I suppose you won't tell me *what* you *have* heard; but you'll come up and just look at her, won't you? She must be up, to meet her father when he comes, and he'll be here before long, if he caught the night coach."

They went up together, and even the creaking of the doctor's boots did not disturb the sleep into which the patient had fallen. As he stood looking at her thoughtfully, she put out her hand, and Marion touched it gently, as she had done many times before in the night.

"Hum!—ah!" said the doctor, slowly, and looking at Marion with a queer expression on his face. "What has become of the baby?"

"What do you mean?" replied Marion, who had too much of the gipsy habit to be easily startled, though she felt a little disconcerted at the sudden air of conviction expressed in his tone. "Who has told you anything about a baby?" she added, in answer to the faint smile and the shake of the head with which he intimated that there was no doubt whatever about the fact.

"I might have heard enough to make me suppose something of the kind; and, indeed, he had enough sense, even in the wandering of fever, to bind me to secresy about anything that he may have said; but if I hadn't heard a word about it, I'm doctor enough to know it now. I've seen her; she is putting out her hand to seek it now. Poor thing! poor thing! it's an infernal business, and I don't wonder at his being afraid to let her father know of it; there'd be another tragedy in the family, as sure as—as——. I say," he added, interrupting himself suddenly, but whispering in Marion's ear, "the baby's dead, I suppose, isn't it? Was it alive when she was brought home from the river?"

"Alive, yes; and is alive now, and that's the only question I must answer. Let us both keep what we know to ourselves for the present, at any rate, Master Letsom."

"So much the worse," said the doctor, gloomily, without heeding the last remark. "Better have been dead, a good deal; better both have been dead, by George," he added, "at least God knows; it's an awful thing, and must be a mortal sin to take another's life, or to throw away one's own—a thing that no soul can answer for."

"Well, don't you run the risk, then, pray, Master Letsom," said Marion, smiling rather grimly. "Thank you heartily for looking at her, but don't leave your other patients to themselves, for if her father is not here in an hour's time the London coach has broke down."

"Good-bye, nurse, then," replied the doctor, quite in his professional manner. "See, she is waking now; give her some breakfast, and then let her take half this powder in a glass of wine, if there's any in the house; if not, water will do. The other half in four hours, just before her dinner, d'ye see," and off he went, to get a couple of hours' sleep before his morning round of visits and his duties at the Grundon Union.

Barbara was up and dressed, looking pale and frightened, but not without self-possession, before she heard her father's heavy footstep upon the gravel walk leading up to the little door. Oh! how her blood stirred as she listened to that well-known sound. He was true, at all events; true and alive, and a man to lean upon, and even with that dread secret in her heart which she might, perhaps, never dare to tell him, there was a sense of comfort in his strong presence, after that dreadful lonely night—that wild, terrible dream. "Only for a little time!" she said to herself, in that sad refrain, which now sounded less sorrowful. Another moment, and he had come in, and she had run into those outstretched arms which held her clasped with the strength of love to his breast.

Marion had gone out into the little kitchen beyond, but she could hear the great sobs come bursting out of the old man's breast, and the low weeping of his child; and, unused as she was to exhibit any but sterner emotions, the market-woman sat down upon a low stool and, with a hard frown upon her face, to think how she could be such a fool, cried in true sympathy.

She could leave them now. The old man was sitting in his arm-chair, his daughter at his feet taking off his gaiters, which had been spattered by the miry road. Her fingers trembled, and she wept still; but he was weeping too, the tears glistening amidst the golden treasure of her hair, which had fallen all about her shoulders.

All that day her father stayed at home writing, for he had his account-books out directly after breakfast; but breakfast itself was a long affair, for she sat beside him and poured out his tea, and would wait upon him herself—would even have fed him had he consented to it; while every time she handed him a cup, or touched his hand, or did him the smallest service, the tears started in his eyes afresh, and he looked at her with a face so wistful and so moved with yearning and pity, that she began to fear he had learnt something of her secret—had begun to hope it rather.

"Where have you been in London, father?" she said, at last, the hot blood tingling in her cheeks. "Did you go to fetch me home, or on other business? It had something to do with me, I know." Oh! that she should be deceiving that loving heart, should be acting out a lie under the sense of that terrible secret that lay between them. What could she do? Her very presence there was a falsehood, a base return for all that he had given her; and yet she dared not tell him, if he did not know already.

"I went in consequence of something that I heard, my own poor, dear little daughter," he returned; "something which you cannot see would be a great evil and a calamity to both of us, something of the undoing of which will perhaps give us both some pain, but which must be undone because I love you and would shield you from all the harm that must come of it, and because *you* love *me*, and must not bring disgrace and shame upon me in my old age. My heart is lighter now that I have come home and found you here, Barbara," he added, taking her in his arms again; "for I begin to believe that you will be able to forget this, even as she said you would."

"As who said?"

"Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, his mother. Oh! my girl, my girl, this should never have been; but there, it is a mere girlish fancy, and we will seek a way to forget it, darling."

"Forget it—forget *him!* Father, don't ask me to do that. If you only knew how impossible it is!"

His face blanched, his brow grew so dark, and his lips so rigid when she said this to him, imploringly, that nothing save death itself could have wrought such a change upon a face. Oh! she dare not tell him. It would be only for a little time, only for a little time; and so her thoughts came back again to that same sad tune.

"My daughter, my only comfort and joy, don't say that," he returned, presently, with the sudden sternness fading out of his face again; "you'll try. 'Twill be hard, perhaps. I would not wound your little tender soul by saying that even the lightest liking you ever took to anything would be aught but painful in the giving up: but you must. This matter has gone no further than many such in youth do go, and it will be less bitter to wake out of this dream—for it is but a dream, dear little one—than to find it end in a dark reality for both of us. I give you no reproaches, Barbara, for keeping such a matter from me. The fact of your so doing proves how childish and how unreal it is; and I would to Heaven that I could spare you pain; but it must be ended now and for ever." Oh! how mean and cruel he felt, knowing that the next day he would take her far away from all the dangers that he dreaded. She lay then sobbing in his arms, and he had no word of comfort to give her; for he had begun to hope that it was impossible for a mere girlish affection to be so deeply rooted; but if the homely proverb were true, nothing so violent could be of long duration, when new scenes and new influences had helped to efface the recollection of that childish love-making. To-morrow he would take her away, apparently for a time, but really never to return. And even he himself might one day forget Ralph Fairhoe and all the struggle that he had passed through for these many years in keeping the honour of a house whose latest scion had made him so evil a return.

Had he only known how—when she at last looked up and kissed him, and her heart was sustained only by the one hope of Oswald Fairhoe coming to tell what she dare not reveal, or, at least, to steal her away from him who was speaking of possible disgrace and misery from an alliance which was her sole trust—he might have died where he sat, stricken down before her with a sudden shock, and she his murderess. No, she would wait and find the means of breaking it to him gently; perhaps only when she was the acknowledged wife of Fairhoe's master. Till *he* claimed her, she must live that falsehood out.

And so he sat writing, but now and then following her with his eager eyes as she went softly hither and thither. Each was hoping for a different ending, and, close as they were in seeming, a dividing secret lay upon the heart of each.

CHAPTER IX.

MARION'S LOVER.

Marion Rooke went straight from Silas Waine's cottage to her stall in the market, and thence to Mr. Letsom's surgery, where that medical bachelor was just sitting down to a hurried luncheon of bread and cheese; for he had no one to attend to his comforts but a cross old woman, whose chief recommendation as housekeeper lay in the "propriety" which was guaranteed to the outer world by her extreme ugliness. It is true that he employed a weak-eyed young gentleman, with straw-coloured hair, as an assistant; but as this individual had only to attend to dispensing medicines, and was mostly at home, he fared better than his master, who never could be certain of getting back at regular meal-times, and therefore was compelled to put up with makeshift dinners and the reversion of the cold joint. But the worthy doctor seldom complained, though he would occasionally make a wry face to himself; for he was one of those contented souls who seem to live upon love—upon love for their work, whatever it may be; and who, while possessing a keen appreciation of comfort when comfort is to be found awaiting them, regard it so little in comparison with the duty they have to do, that they will spend no time in seeking for it. For the rest, Mr. Letsom was a rather reserved, long-bodied, long-faced, thoughtful gentleman, with that best of all qualities for a doctor—insight. His dark, gentle, earnest eyes seemed to look into his patients and see the disease lurking in their bodies, in spite even of deceptive symptoms. Perhaps as a consequence of this he seldom gave much medicine, relied mostly on simple remedies, was never known to visit patients when he was no longer required, and remained comparatively poor—much poorer than the more fashionable Dr. Sweetning, "the ladies' doctor," whose carriage was seen dawdling outside half the best houses in the neighbourhood; while Mr. Letsom walked his town-round or rode on horseback to see his country patients. Dr. Sweetning lived in a large comfortable house; was a widower, with a niece for his housekeeper; had a handsome service of silver, from which he dined every day at four o'clock; kept a sandwich-case and a flask of sherry in a pocket of his brougham, and lived in a sort of abated luxury and deprecatory refinement; while Letsom tramped hither and thither, and came home at any time to cold mutton and the heel of the cheese.

Of course, he knew and was known by all the people of Grundon; was respected by most of them, especially by the poorer sort, who watched for his coming that they might intercept him with questions, for answering which, if he had not been in a worldly sense a fool, he would have charged a fee. He quite understood all the peculiarities of this class of his patients, however; and, when any of them chose to express their gratitude in the shape of a basket of particularly fine vegetables, or an enticing dish of pig's-fry, or a sieve of fruit, took the offering with a sort of merry gratitude, which was scarcely diminished because his weak-eyed assistant and the cross housekeeper derived the principal benefit from such payments in kind.

Amongst his numerous and best-known acquaintances was Marion, who had, in fact, sent him a good many gratis patients, some of whom, being wandering people, had spread his fame abroad in many a farmhouse kitchen; but for Marion herself he had a sort of curious respect. He studied her as he would have pondered over a remarkable specimen in natural history, and speculated on the peculiarity of her character as he might have guessed some pathological riddle. The result had been that he had discovered there was no mystery whatever about the market-woman—no mystery, and no pretended mystery. She had been left an orphan in service, where, in the dull, depressing monotony of the life at Fairhoe, and with only the companionship of an old lady whose amusement was the concoction of washes and medicaments, and the practice of a sort of herbal alchemy, she had grown reserved and silent. With a strength of character which would have been best developed by a life of action and excitement, she had become stern and sometimes almost masculine in manner; while an overweening sense of unusual knowledge and the use to which she had put it had given her a bearing and manner entirely above that of her own class —had, in fact, led her to exhibit a sort of conscious eccentricity which had a vast influence on many people beside the gipsies, for whom it was first designed. Altogether, Marion Rooke was a person of undoubted distinction, and her stall in the market seldom lacked the best custom, so that she had become a partner of the old woman to whom she first went as a helper, and had a little account at the Grundon bank after she had paid the rent of the one neat room which sufficed for her lodging. That neat lodging included the use of a kitchen—a circumstance which is only mentioned here because of what immediately follows.

Mr. Letsom had just got back from his morning round, which included a call at the Grundon Union to see a pauper. He had been into the surgery and left some directions with his assistant, who was at that moment finishing his own lunch of thick bread-and-dripping with a keen appreciation of the necessity for moderating his appetite that he might do justice to the hot steak-pie at dinner; and he had turned into the little dingy parlour, full of books and instruments, which he called his consulting-room, and where a corner of the table had been cleared for the reception of a battered tray containing a jug of ale and the worst half of a stale loaf, with an uninviting cube of particularly dry cheese.

It might have been that he had been up for the greater part of the previous night, and that he was suffering a little from nervous depression, or he might have felt rather less keenly hungry than usual, so that the fare was a little repulsive; but, for some reason or other, he had never before noticed how sordid and solitary the room looked. It was a pity that they had pulled up the blind, he thought; for if they had but let that old yellow piece of drapery cover the window, the bright sunlight would have been tempered to its proper relative hue, and would not have so lighted up the faded, battered furniture, the worn and dusty carpet, and the shabby little corners where neglected files of papers and other rubbish had collected. But, after all, how could it be helped? It was his own fault, for not buying newer things; and, as he forbade old Hannah to dust or set his table to rights, why, who could wonder that she carried out his instructions to the very letter, and only had a fire lighted when she thought fit? At all events, here was one now, smouldering to dirt and ashes in the rusty grate, and making the stuffy room still more close. He almost smiled at his own testiness, and opened the window to let in a little of the morning air before he broke a piece of bread and cheese and took a draught of ale. He had only just accomplished the latter purpose when his assistant put his head inside the door to say that he was wanted. He slipped the table-napkin over his bread and cheese, with a sort of half-conscious feeling of shame at its coarseness, and asked who it was.

"It is Mrs. Rooke, the market-woman," said the weak-eyed youth; "she says she wants to see you particularly for a minute. Shall she come in?"

Now, it is by no means certain that the assistant would have broken thus unceremoniously into his master's lunch-time for any ordinary patient, for he had a much more decided notion of the dignity of the profession than Mr. Letsom ever gave himself the trouble to assert; but there had been other occasions when Marion had paid the surgery a visit at about the same hour, and it generally followed that she left a substantially-delicate token of her good-will in the shape of a dainty basket of fruit or a piece of snowy butter, or even a hare or a pheasant in the season. That there was something edible in the little round basket which she carried on her arm on the present occasion was a probability warranted alike by previous experience and by the evidence of those sensitive olfactories which in the case of the assistant, perhaps, made up for his defective vision.

"What, have you left your charge so early?" said Mr. Letsom, holding the door open for his visitor. "Nothing wrong there, I hope; if so, I'll look in as I go to Fairhoe to-night. Come in here. You won't mind my eating a bit of something, I dare say; for I haven't much time to spare."

Now, if the truth must be told, the doctor himself was blessed with a nose little less sensitive than that of his assistant; and, even while he spoke so lightly of eating, such an aromatic whiff came from that basket that the stale bread and cheese concealed beneath the tablecloth became to him inexpressibly revolting; he would brave the wrath of the faithful old Hannah by ringing to inquire if there was any cold meat.

"Well, I'm glad you haven't had your lunch, Doctor," said Marion, stopping him, as he was on his way to the bellpull; "for I made haste to get here with something that's better than Mrs. Hannah knows how to put together, or I'm much mistaken. Pheu!" she added, contemptuously, as she moved the bread and cheese to the other end of the table, and dusted his plate with a corner of the napkin. "You want something better than that after your night's work, sir." What was it that she drew so tenderly out of the basket and deposited on the plate? Whatever it was, it was hot, and sent up such a delicious gale that the doctor stared about him, in a sort of doubt that any compound inclosed within a cylinder of pie-crust could by the remotest possibility diffuse such fragrance. "I thought, perhaps, you'd like a parsty for your lunch, Doctor; and, as I've something to ask you, may be you'll pardon my being so bold as to stay and see you eat it," said Marion.

Now, if there was anything in the whole range of sensuous or selfish enjoyments which had a charm for Mr. Letsom, it was a "parsty;" and though he only said, "Dear me, a parsty; bless my soul! really, now, Mrs. Rooke, this is very good—I really—dear me!" he went quietly to a drawer, and, taking out a fork, prepared by a series of sniffs for five minutes of unmixed enjoyment. But then, this really was a most uncommon "parsty;" there were all sorts of things in it, including button mushrooms, oysters, and a couple of wheat-ears, which, as the reader knows, are the ortolans or beccaficos of England.

Not till he had plunged his knife through the crust and was just raising the lid, did he recollect himself. "I beg your pardon," he then said, in some confusion. "You will take something, too. It's surprising how selfish eating and drinking nice things can make us; and I declare you have been better than a doctor to me, for I was quite depressed and queer, and old Hannah, you see, isn't a very good caterer. You've brought me quite round with—a pie!" and he gave an odd grin as he reached down a dusty bottle from a top shelf of the bookcase.

His face was quite beaming again under the influence of that wonderful "parsty;" and, in fact, he wanted food and wine; but Marion refused both until he insisted that she should have a glass, he himself drinking out of a graduated medicine measure.

"You must remember that I only take wine medicinally," he said, laughing; "and this is really good stuff, capital old madeira, that was given me in a fit of repentance by a gouty patient of mine, who insisted on my bringing it away with me, lest he should be tempted to break my injunctions and bring on another attack. There's only a dozen of it, and this is the very first bottle; and so, Mrs. Rooke, thank you for the parsty;" and he drank off eight drachms, fluid measure, as a preparative for the more solid refreshment.

Marion had taken a seat at his invitation; but, amongst her other oddities, belonging either to her gipsy or her market associations, she never sat upon a chair if she could find any other suitable object, so that she had taken quiet possession of a small deal box that stood near the fireplace.

"Wouldn't you rather take a chair?" said the doctor. He had noted this peculiarity of Marion's long ago; but, as he was always amused at her ways, he asked the question.

"No, thank you, I like a low seat," she answered, absently, as she watched the embers in the grate, and waited for him to take the edge off his appetite before she stated her business.

There was something very striking in her appearance as she sat there; the gold of the sun's light mingling with the red flicker of the fire in her blue-black hair; her regular face, with its set features, relieved by the dark lashes of her bright full eyes. She was a woman beyond the fresh bloom of youth, but there was a supple grace in her full figure which was in some way set off or heightened by the country dress she wore. Even her feet, covered with fine white stockings, almost looked the smaller for the stout leather shoes which encased them; and a very shapely ancle was revealed from beneath the hem of her short skirt.

John Letsom was not a very fanciful or, in the usual sense of the word, a sentimental man. He was a bachelor, with the iron grey just showing in his whiskers and his closely-cut hair, and he was past forty years old. He had just finished a most excellent lunch, which had come to him, as it were, like those banquets which appeared at the command of the fortunate youth in the Arabian tale; and he had also imbibed sixteen drachms of fine old East India madeira, apothecaries' measure. John Letsom was very comfortable, and though he had as little of the romantic element about him as most men, he could not but let his eyes wander to the figure and face of the woman who had come in so opportunely to keep him from semi-starvation. More than that, he had so often observed and speculated on Marion's character, and had learned so much of her way of life and of her real disposition and acquirements, apart from that strange gipsy connection which he had vainly tried to persuade her to break off, that he had somehow come to regard her as belonging in some way to his practice at Grundon. It was from no sudden fancy, then, although it was with no very deliberate intention, that, as he finished his madeira and pushed away his plate, he said, "I wish I had you here every day. I'd like to see you sitting there, and with lunch ready for me after my morning rounds. It's selfish to talk that way, I know; but, upon my word, I think we could be very happy together."

Marion looked at him bewildered, at first, as though the meaning of his words had not quite reached her; then she started up, with her cheeks and neck all crimson, and her eyes turned towards the ground. It wasn't anger, it wasn't shame, it wasn't fear; it was surprise and doubt, not, perhaps, unmixed with some great struggle of regret; but, whatever it was, it transformed her from a good-looking into a very handsome woman; and that John Letsom saw as he sat wondering at what he himself had said as much as he wondered what she was going to say.

"Mr. Letsom," she cried at last, with her face still flushed, but looking at him quite steadily, "thank you, no. I never could be housekeeper to any one. I can fashion my own living, and wouldn't take service."

"Take service! Who asked you to do that? People don't talk that way when they want a servant, do they? I meant ——"

"You surely can't think it a seemly jest to speak so, then," she said. "Don't tell me that, or I shall think I've come low, indeed. Let it pass; but don't play off such jests on me. You forget yourself, Mr. Letsom."

"Upon my soul," said the doctor, rising in great trouble, "I was serious: I was indeed. You have no right to say I wasn't. You would make an admirable doctor's wife, Marion; and I'm no such young sprig as to want a school-girl to be the mistress of the house. I tell you again that, if you'll have me, I'll try to make you happy: I will, upon my soul and body; and you may think it's the pastry and the madeira, but it isn't. I'm a fool at this kind of thing; but I mean it, as sure as I'm alive: I do, really." And he gave a comical grin as he held out his hand, but his face was as open and honest as the day.

She saw this as she put his hand away. "I can't answer you now," she said, looking into the fire, with a troubled movement of her foot upon the fender and with a tear upon her cheek. "I've not refused to be married all these years to come to such a quick ending all at once; and more than that, sir," she added, looking up again, "see what it would do for you; how could you make way, how could any doctor make way, with a half-gipsy market-woman for his wife, especially when she and hers have been known all their lives in the town, even though no harm's spoken of any of 'em; you must mind what the whole world would say."

"The whole world be —— well, I can't quite go that far, either; but, I tell you, I don't go back from what I've said this morning for two worlds. The only patients I'm likely to get, like you as well as they do me, and about half of 'em seem to prefer your physic to mine. I tell you it would be a profit to me if we went into partnership. I've been working away here for years, and we've known each other long enough. Heaven knows I'm not, I hope, a selfish fellow altogether, but I'm tired of working alone, and so ought you to be."

"Stop, stop!" said Marion, holding up her hand. "If you're not selfish, don't put upon me a weight that I can never hope to bear. I promise to think of it for your sake, if you will have it so, John Letsom. It would be a lie for me to pretend that I don't feel proud to hear what you have said. I thought that blushes had gone from my face many a long day since, and you have brought them back again. I feel, somehow, that I should be pulling you down if I could ever come to bear your name; and yet I—I never saw the man that I could love and honour, if I couldn't love and honour you. There, I've said what my pride would have had me cut my tongue out sooner than tell to any man; and you've brought my heart into my eyes and made me pity myself, and that's what never a man has done before; but never, never say a word again like you have said to-day. It can't be; I must bide as I am till my dying day." She was trembling, and yet, by a strong effort of will, she stood and looked into the fire without a sob, though the tears were running down her face.

"When you say it can't be, is there any reason that I don't know of? any reason why it would be really impossible?"

"No, none; none that you would think impossible," she said, quickly, and looking up at him with her old expression. "You know all my life pretty well. The only thing you don't know concerns others, and I came to tell you that to-day, and to ask you to help me, if what I fear comes to pass."

"Then you must come and tell me this evening, for it's time I was a mile off. I'll help you all I can always, remember that; and remember this, too, that I'm not easily baffled when I make up my mind, and I shall try to change yours. That's the best of being a patient sort of fellow, Marion. I can wait."

He had put on his hat as he spoke; but as they reached the door he took it off again, and before she could prevent him kissed her full upon the cheek. It was well for her that no gipsy eyes were prying near, or she would never have succeeded in hiding the crimson flush that dyed the place his lips had pressed, even though she bent, pretending to look into her basket. Master Swiffle, the weak-eyed dispenser, might have noticed it, but his attention was already engaged in the effort to discover how much was left of the "parsty."

It might have been thought that the doctor would not have expected another visit from Marion after the conversation of the morning, but he knew her so well that he was scarcely surprised to see her waiting for him at the street corner on his return. They went in together, and, to the wonder of Mr. Swiffle, Mr. Letsom forgot to stop on his way to leave directions for making up the "pills at night," which succeeded the "draughts in the morning." Directly the door closed behind him, the doctor turned and looked straight into Marion's face; she returned his inquiring glance frankly and without confusion.

"That's all right," said he, shaking hands with her and pointing to a seat. "You needn't be afraid of my renewing the subject at present, Marion. I can wait, you know, and I mean to—till this day two months or this day two years, if need be. Now, what is it you want to ask me?"

"You are going up to see Oswald Fairhoe again, to-night," she said, leaning her arm upon the table, to which she had drawn her low seat. "Do you think he'll be sensible enough to understand what you say?"

"That depends on what it is I have to tell him. He was wandering this morning, but not altogether delirious. He may be better or worse; but I should think no worse, or a messenger would have been here to fetch me. Is it anything important that you wish me to say—a matter of almost life and death, that is?"

"Yes, it is a matter, perhaps, even of life and death; and if you don't tell him I must, and that before his lady mother comes back to keep him to herself and shut out any messenger that may bring him tidings of Barbara Waine. Let him know this much at least: that the steward will take her away before the week is out; and that if he has a spark of truth or honour such as I begin to think belong to none of his race, he will send for the old man and set his daughter right before the world."

"You mean marry her, of course," said Mr. Letsom, thoughtfully; "there's no way of setting anything right till that's done, if it isn't done already."

"Do you think it is? Had you any reason to believe that she was his wife from the wandering talk you spoke of?" said Marion, eagerly.

"It's hard to say whether I had *any* reason or not; but there was none that would satisfy me if I were her father or her friend, none that would satisfy *you*, Marion, and yet you should know more of the truth than I can even guess. What think you?"

"She almost swore me to secresy, and I pledged my faith that I would not betray her; in telling you I break no trust, for I can believe in your word as firmly as she believed in mine. She said that he was her husband."

"How was it that she kept it from her father, then? There have been false marriages before now, Marion, and this may be one of them; though I can hardly think that Oswald Fairhoe could be such a villain. You believed her, of course?"

"Ay, I did, and I do; for her father would have been as hard and cruel as Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe herself; and she dreads for any but Oswald to speak of it, which he had sworn to do when the time came that he could arrange either to fight it out or to take her away and claim his own after they had left Fairhoe together. If he should delay much longer, mischief will come of it, and it may be too late. Promise me," she added anxiously, "that you will leave no stone unturned to urge him to it to-night, if he can hear and understand what you say. She will do nothing without him, and she trusts still to her father's love if he can only learn the truth, and see her husband, as she calls him, ready to claim her."

"*Is* he her husband, that's the question?" said the doctor, almost testily. "If she couldn't be more explicit and tell you how, and when, and where they were married, I don't half believe it. Why shouldn't she?"

"Well, she had but a little while to speak about it at all, and was half the time in a sort of stupor, as you saw her this morning; but through it all she said that it would be his ruin and hers if any but Oswald spoke of it before he had made it known to his mother and to old Silas."

Mr. Letsom leaned his head upon his hand and fell into a brown study, during which he kept his eyes fixed abstractedly upon the market-woman's face, as though the sight of her somehow helped him to judicious reflection.

It was strange, but the darkly-ruddy cheeks of his companion glowed more deeply when she sat in silence and had time to consider the topic of their conversation. Her stern and half-defiant disregard of ordinary modes of speaking, as well as her reserved and depressed manner, had some way been disturbed, and a new phase of feeling to which she was a stranger had taken possession of her. Try how she might to suppress it, she felt as though girlhood had come upon her in middle life, and she bit her lips with vexation, that yet was not all pain, to find how the influence of an honest admiration, bluntly expressed, overmastered her. Not that she could analyse the matter; she could only resent it upon herself, and even while her face burnt, and she was ready to laugh and cry at once, she strove to think herself a fool, and set her brows into such a frown that its expression struck the doctor all at once, as he came to the end of his musings.

"Ah! I'm afraid it's a bad case," he said at last, nodding his head; "married or not, it can make little difference in the part he means to play."

"What do you mean? You don't think he will desert the poor child?"

"Well, so far as that goes, I fancy they have both been a little ready to get rid of the *poor child.*"

"I don't mean that, John Letsom; I was speaking of Barbara; she expects to have her baby again, as she says it's only for a little time. If you'd heard her sing that same mournful song over and over again, as I did last night, you'd not think so hardly of her."

The doctor looked at her curiously, and laughed—he scarcely knew why; but, seeing that her gloomy face made no response, he laid his hand gently on her arm.

"Unless I'm greatly mistaken," he said, "Oswald Fairhoe intends to get the girl away and keep her in hiding from her father and from his mother. That's just what such men do—men who haven't the courage to avow themselves. Anybody may suffer for their cowardice; while they wait for an opportunity that never comes. And if he tires of his toy——"

"What!" cried Marion, starting up, with her eyes aflame. "If he should leave her after all, he would deserve—— I don't know what he'd deserve; but I could kill him myself, and glory in it!"

"Hum! ha! I shouldn't be surprised if you could," said Letsom, quietly, but still a little startled at the intensity of meaning in her face and attitude. He had never seen this demonstrative and dramatic side of her character before, and began to guess that it came from her gipsy predilections; but he saw, too, that there was a substratum of nerve and will that made it very real. "No doubt you could, Marion," he continued, smiling; "but, you see, killing him would not mend the matter."

She was so terribly in earnest, and had so long been accustomed to see her strong nerve and meaning manner influence those to whom they were displayed, that she was scarcely prepared for such a quiet response. Here was a man who knew her nature better even than she knew it herself, and who passed by what had become a habit without regarding it, except by a merely laughing comment. She sat down again in some confusion.

"Listen to me for a moment," he continued. "I don't believe it will make much difference whether they are married or not, as far as his intention goes, and he may be more faithful than I give him credit for being. I fully believe that he is true to her now, at all events; but let him once get her away to London, or perhaps abroad, and who can say what will be the end of it. There's only one way out of it, if you and I must meddle in the affair at all."

"We must, then, sir."

"Hullo! What's that? If you call me sir again I vow I'll wash my hands of the whole business. Call me by my right name, and I'll go in for it as unreasonably as anybody not altogether a fool could wish."

"John Letsom," replied Marion, taking his hand, "I would go across the seas to help this poor child and to save her father from shame. I owe more to them than I can well tell you. When my brother came out of prison—and you know who sent him there, and what he went for—Silas Waine gave him food and shelter, and would have found him work and wage in some other place, but he cast in his lot with the gipsy folk; and when I turned my back upon the house yonder, because I would never more eat the bread of its old griping master or his hangdog son, the steward thought me good enough to be his daughter's guest, though she was the very apple of his eye. I tell you, I could shed my blood to keep either of them from harm."

"I will undertake to wake Oswald Fairhoe up to-night, if he can be brought to understand what I tell him; but unless he has turned the point of fever at which I left him this morning, it would be worse than useless."

"Then you must see Silas Waine; it's of no use to speak to Mrs. Fairhoe, for she would believe no word of what you say. Oh! do, do help me in this. Where *my* tongue has been tied by a promise yours hasn't; and you can tell the old man what you've heard in that sick-room at Fairhoe. Nay, you can tell him that you know where the child is."

"Why, Marion, you are coming out in a new character; you have generally been ready to manage all your own affairs, and now you come to me to help you."

"I never had any one to help me before," replied the market-woman, with her eyes upon the table, but without taking away her hands. "All my life I've had to see to myself; but in this there's nobody but you can say what should be said."

"Very well, then, I go to Fairhoe in half an hour, and unless I can rouse Mr. Oswald to send a message to Waine, I shall call at the cottage in the morning. Will you meet me there if it doesn't rain—by the bend of the road, say at eight o'clock, and then you can add your testimony to mine if need be? By the bye, where is the child? We may want to give the old man ocular demonstration."

"I have put the poor little thing with Lambert's wife. You know Lambert, the bricklayer, his wife's just lost her last baby, and she was glad to take a nurse-child for a lady that is obliged to give up nursing—as I told her—for a week or two. I could bring it with me in the morning."

"Oh, yes! a pretty thing that would be for all the early risers about Grundon to see. You don't want me to adopt the little one, I suppose?"

"Do have done with such nonsense. I wonder you're are not ashamed, John Letsom, to make a jest about such a matter; but I will be there, at all events. Can I make you some tea before you go?"

"No, thank you. Mrs. Dratt will send me the last of the pot; and it's time I was off. But, I say, I'll get a little teapot of my own and a canister of green tea, if you'll come and make it for me sometimes." He had his hand upon the door as he spoke, and turned round that he might open it for her to go out first. But for this momentary delay he would have run against Master Swiffle, who had been listening with great intensity for the last five minutes.

CHAPTER X.

MR. SWIFFLE'S DISCOVERY.

GRUNDON had a habit of being up early on market mornings, for it was not very easy to sleep through all the bustle and confusion that attended the arrival of carts and waggons, and their unloading in the main street, at the end of which a queer old roof, supported by great square wooden pillars, overshadowed the bricked and paved area containing the stalls and benches of the dealers in vegetables, poultry, butter, eggs, and cheese. The butchers' shambles occupied one side of a by-street called Market-row, and the stalls and hand-barrows of small hucksters who sold haberdashery, hardware, crockery, and baskets were jostled together, round the open space in front of the Town-hall—a one-sided, rickety structure, flanking one corner of the market-place itself, and possessing only a set of disused offices in the basement, and a great gaunt, shabby, unfinished room above, the floor of which was, in fact, laid on the only flat part of the market roof. It was seldom that anything ever went on in the Town-hall; and though it was now and then hired for the exhibition of an orrery, or the performance of some sanguine theatrical company which possessed a temporary stage, these occasions were so few and far between that the bills and posters of eighteen months ago were plastered over the very door, and helped to add something to the look of dirt and decay which naturally belonged to the place. The High-street itself, however, was a bright, bustling place enough, especially on market days; and, as a speculating builder had recklessly bought land on the outskirts of the town, and covered it with stucco-fronted and green-blinded houses which met the ripe-looking old red-brick edifices of the century before, at the very end of the parish, a visitor going straight through, without visiting the little by-ways and clayey no-thoroughfares, which held the poorer cottages, would have thought that Grundon was a town of no little distinction, especially as it returned a member to Parliament (we are speaking now of a time before the Reform Bill), and was supposed to cost the said member a pretty penny for the privilege of representing it.

But even the labourers' cottages looked bright on this particular morning, for a sort of sunny haze hung over everything, while there was a crisp coolness in the air, which denoted the first warning of the coming winter. The early sun shone in brilliant flecks and patches of light upon upper windows where the blinds had not yet been withdrawn, sparkled upon the great mahogany doors of the bank, glistened in the brass plate and bell-handle outside the solicitor's office, and flashed on the milk-cans as the dairy-carts rattled "up street," driven by farmers' wives, from the surrounding country.

Mr. Letsom's house seldom came in for much of the early sun, for it lay in a thoroughfare which was neither in nor out of the main street, being, in fact, a sort of fork or branch of it, situate at the lower end of the town. It was a narrow, dim, rather shabby, and yet respectable house: a place which seemed to have been neglected in its youth, and not well cared for in its maturity. The doorsteps were sadly in need of hearth-stone; the dust lay upon the mouldings of the door itself. The blinds often hung awry, and might have been the better for washing; and on this very morning one of the lower windows, on which was painted in black letters on a white streak, the word surgery, was decorated with the uncombed head of Mr. Swiffle, who looked out, with eyes almost as red as the lamp that hung above the fanlight.

Mr. Swiffle had been up too early for his own comfort, and was so dissatisfied with the whole proceeding that he had done nothing since but look out of window and yawn, in which latter occupation he was seen by Marion as she went past on her way to Fairhoe.

He was yawning and shivering so terribly that it took some time, even after he had opened his eyes wide enough to see Marion standing at the door, to reply to her inquiry whether Mr. Letsom had yet returned.

"Back! No; I only wish he'd took what he wanted with him, and not have sent a messenger to ring one up before daylight for half the drugs in the place. I should like to know how *he'd* relish being rung out of his bed before he'd had half a night's rest. It's a regular beastly profession is a medical man; never know what it is to have an hour to call your own. You've had your breakfast now, I'll be bound, haven't you?" he added, looking furtively at his visitor's hands, as though to be certain that she hadn't a basket with her.

"Oh, yes! I had my breakfast in the market two hours ago."

"Ah! I thought as much; and here's mine won't be ready for another hour, at least; and then such a breakfast. By George! I almost wish I'd saved some of that pie from yesterday. I say, that *was* a pie; you don't often make 'em, I suppose—except for yourself, I mean. It must ha' been better hot; but it was precious good cold."

"Oh! you finished it up, did you? Suppose Mr. Letsom should ask where it is when he comes home?"

"Oh! trust him. No, give the devil his due, he ain't so mean as that, neither; he may grudge a person his natural rest, but, hang it, you know, he ain't so mean as to ask about a person's share of a pie. Did you want to see him particular?" he asked, suddenly, and with a meaning expression on his face, as though his memory had suddenly awakened, "because p'r'aps I should do as well, you know, as far as *professional* confidence goes. You understand, of course," he added, with an unpleasant grin, "that there's private secrets, and there's professional secrets; and if the last wasn't sacred, why, where would medical men be?"

Marion regarded him with an unmoved face, but without deigning him any reply.

"I say," he continued, in a very audible whisper, leaning across the counter and supporting his pinky-white face upon his thumbs, "was the stuff that he sent for this mornin' for *her?* because if it was it's my confidential opinion she ain't bein' treated right; not in her situation you, understand; it's too much stimulant by a good deal."

"What are you talking about? It's Mr. Oswald Fairhoe that your master has gone to see, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes! ye-e-e-s. My master, as you call him, has gone to see Oswald Fairhoe, no doubt; we don't generally call ourselves servants in the profession, Mistress Rooke; but *he's* gone there, certainly. I say, it's a pity that any gentleman should have so lowered himself, ain't it, and with a servant, too? *Lor!* I wonder you like to have to do with it yourself. Which of 'em was it now? Quite professional confidence, of course. It was never the cook, sure*ly?* and the infant out at nuss, I hear."

For a moment Marion was staggered, but before a doubt could shape itself in her mind against the doctor, she had read Master Swiffle's secret by the one weak glance that he gave towards the door leading to Letsom's sitting-room. Foregoing the sudden impulse to strike him, and slowly unclenching her hand, she too leaned upon the counter, and looked at him steadily with her great black eyes until she had him completely focussed, and then, bringing her face quite close, she whispered, "if you ever want to get your sight stronger keep your eyes from the keyholes, Master Swiffle, especially where women carry long bodkins, or you may have to go about led by a dog. They say walls have ears, and that's true too ; but it's the ears of listeners that have been nailed to them for playing the spy. It doesn't matter just now," she added, bringing her face still closer, as the assistant retreated a little, and griping his arm with fingers that closed round it like a vice, "because you've heard nothing but a jumble that nobody can understand ; but don't let your tongue run away with your ears, or there may be a way of stopping that too, even though 'tis only with a 'parsty.'" She broke into a laugh as she released his arm, and turned to go.

Only when she had reached the surgery door, which opened into the passage, she turned and said, "And the next parsty shall be all for yourself." But he was still staring and blinking at her, like an owl suddenly surprised by daylight, and seemed to have no interest in her words. Not till she had gone out and closed the door, which shut upon a latch that rang a sharp peal upon a bell hanging on the wall above, did he mutter to himself, "Well, you ain't missis of the house yet awhile, and I ain't sure whether I wouldn't rather you was never coming back. What I've seen, and what I've heard may or may not be safe, but I know who'll be here again to-day ; and so what I ask myself is, 'to lie, or not to lie, that is the question,' and a question that I can't answer till I see what there is for breakfast."

CHAPTER XI.

A FATHER'S CURSE.

THERE can be little wonder that Barbara Waine should have inherited something of her father's gloomy nature, although in her weaker mental constitution it took the form of a melancholy, which added to the wistful charm of her pensive face and to the gentleness of her character. During the whole of that day, when her father sat writing and she had time to think, she was haunted by the dim recollection of the murmuring river, and, as she endeavoured to recall the feelings with which she had approached it, her overwrought fancy, aided by a very active conscience, led her to accuse herself of an intention to destroy herself and her child. Mingled with all her self-reproaches was the thought of the deception she was even now practising and the sense of those dread threatenings against disobedience to parents which are none the less true because we do not at once see their awful fulfilment. Moving silently hither and thither about the house, she felt the very air grow thick with the foreboding of denunciation, and through all her misery she seemed to hear the low cry of that little deserted child as she had heard it the night before even in the darkness that came upon her on the river bank. Still, thank God! it was alive, and she had been spared the sin of suicide and murder, unless the intention to commit it should be counted to her for the act; well, at least, thank God that the act was frustrated; and so she fell on her knees by the bedside and blindly laid her head upon her outstretched arms, moaning for want of strength and faith to pray.

There she lay for an hour or more, heedless of the declining afternoon sun, in a maze of undefined thought like that which had led her to the river the day before; but through the mist of relieving tears one reality was present to her—her father, and the duty she owed to him. Let Oswald come and claim her as he had promised and she was ready, but till then she would keep faith with both, and go whithersoever she was bidden to go.

It is impossible by any words, however skilfully arranged, to describe these struggles of a soul when sight has left it, or before light comes to it; when it gropes in the dark and misjudges the realities of things, as the blind man who saw men as trees walking. Those who have passed through such terrible experiences know them all too well; those who have been spared cannot know, and need not desire to learn them. Happily, they are often succeeded by a calm, after which the faint glimmering of the morning of hope is descried afar off, and peered at with much fear and doubting, lest that, too, should be a mere illusion—a mirage, to be followed by the blackness of darkness.

A cart was at the door, filled with boxes, bundles, and such few articles of furniture as belonged to the steward, including a couple of his old guns and the desk and work-table that had been his wife's.

"You must pack up your clothes and all your gear, my darling daughter," said Silas, tenderly, but with a wistful watching of her face. "I am going to take you on a visit to-night to Mrs. Morland, at Havering. You remember Mrs. Morland, your mother's cousin, though you haven't seen her for so many years; she keeps the post-office, you know, and you'll stay with her for a day or two."

"What, must I pack up everything that belongs to me?" she said, trembling still more. "Father—father!" she added, eagerly, and still clinging to him, "are we going away from here for ever?"

"Nay, 'for ever' is a long word, child, and belongs not to us; but go from Fairhoe I must, and I must take you with me. Not alone because of yourself and the —— the matters that are passed, but for my own sake, and lest I should commit a sin that would have to be grievously repented of. I dare not stay, child; and, if I dare, I would not when I look at you and know what calamity might come of it. There—there, don't tremble so, Barby; I'll stay and help you to fasten up your boxes—one to go on in the cart and one with the things you're likely to want now to go with us to Havering in farmer Briscoe's chaise."

She scarcely answered him, but, with a sudden effort, began to empty her chest of drawers. Her own childish dresses, her two best gowns, her dainty lace and muslin, all were there, and were soon laid out upon the bed, from which the greater part were transferred to a large trunk that stood in a corner of the room; while two or three common dresses and other articles, with linen, shoes, and her best hat were placed in the old school-box which she remembered so well, and the sight of which now revived her bitter grief as she knelt beside it.

Silas had rolled up the bedding in the coverlid, and tied it round with a thick cord, and now stood watching her until the packing was completed. Only one drawer—the top one—remained unopened, and twice she had placed her hand on the brass ring, and twice drawn it away again, with a half-frightened look towards her father.

"I'll carry these downstairs to the cart, and then it can go its journey, and you finish packing the box," he said, catching her dismayed glance. He had already stowed away all the rest of his household gear, so that the remaining furniture looked gaunt and bare. He intended to leave it for the next comer, for he had found the cottage provided with old-fashioned chairs and tables when he first took possession of it, and those things that he had added to them he meant as surplusage for wear and tear. He would do strict justice, and leave the place no worse than he found it, that neither Oswald Fairhoe nor the next comer should be the loser by him. The remembrance of Oswald Fairhoe was revived in his mind by that locked drawer; for he thought he divined the reason of Barbara's confusion and her reluctance to open it in his presence. If gifts had come to her from Oswald, she must return them; but he would leave it to her own feelings to decide how this should be done. Heaven guide her rightly! He stayed downstairs for a full half-hour and the cart was on its journey, not towards Havering, but on the road to London; but she never heard its wheels crunching the stones in the road, and the time was too precious to waste in watching its departure. Oh! the contents of that upper drawer—with what a tender interest, and yet with what a passionate outburst of grief, did she lay them on the bare sacking of the bedstead, and hover over them as she folded them, with a few sprays of dried lavender, and a shower of crumpled rose-leaves, into a parcel! The scent of the roses might have been drawn forth afresh by the tears that steeped their petals as they fell among the tiny shirts and long frocks of that baby wardrobe! For these were her infant's clothes, made, as it seemed, so long ago, finished with such lingering hope, locked up and hidden with such wavering fear, now concealed with such shuddering despair. There was no time even for such relief as might be afforded by gloating over them and handling them daintily; and so, with a hasty rumpling of muslin, and ribbon-bows, and all the pretty little flimsy finery that might have been intended for her doll—for she looked too young for a mother, even now—she made them into a parcel, and sat down to write a hurried pencil-note to Marion Rooke, to whom she hoped to be allowed to consign them without question.

"Dear Marion,—I know not how this will reach you, but keep the little things for *him*, now that I cannot see him, even to hold him for a moment in my arms. I am to be taken to Havering to-night, and if I am not back again in three days pray come there to me, at Mrs. Morland's post-office. Let O. F. know where I am, that he may not delay; for I am sure father means to go far away, where it may be harder still to meet. Come to Havering or tell *him* to come; see him, if you can, to-morrow, and say that my heart is almost breaking. I am so miserable, and so afraid; and we shall never, never come to Fairhoe again if he delays. "Barbara."

This was the letter, and she had only just folded it and fastened it with a wafer when her father returned.

She trembled a little as she rose from tying the note to the parcel, expecting that he would question her, and dreading the lie that she must tell, unless she would confess all. She was spared this pain, however, for she said, "It is only a bundle that I want Marion Rooke to leave somewhere;" and as he still believed that she had packed up Oswald's presents for the purpose of returning them, he only replied, "That is right, my girl. I will take this; and while you are getting ready, Ben, who is to drive us, will have time to take it round to one of the men, who can go over to Grundon with it in the morning."

He carried it down with the box, which she had packed with all her ordinary clothing, and before he returned she had put on her hat and cloak, ready to accompany him. With a shuddering sigh she looked round the rooms where all the early part of her life had been passed. They seemed so bare and dreary, with their disordered furniture, and the naked spaces whence little familiar objects had been taken were so suggestive of the joyless future which seemed to await her—a life stripped of grace and happiness—that she hastened to the door, where her father was already standing. He only turned for a moment to look at her as she came through the little parlour, and then waited for her with his back to the house, from which he seemed to turn with gloomy satisfaction; but she hesitated at the doorstep, and, after one half-despairing glance, which, swift as it was, seemed to take in every well-known detail of the place just as a drowning creature might look his last at earth, and trees, and sky, before he was overwhelmed for ever—climbed into the chaise and hid her face in her hands.

Silas took his place beside her in a moment, but he thought it better to let her grief have its way; and so, just as the last angry glare of the sun made a red rim on the edge of the farthest upland, and the pale stars glimmered out one by one in the grey sky, they rumbled along the road which might never be retraced.

It is possible that many of the readers of this story may know Havering by its better and more ancient name of Havering Attebower. It is the very place in which to nurse a silent sorrow, which the quiet of its shady woods and groves may either confirm or cure. It *was* such a place, at least; for who knows what it may be to-day, when commissions fail to protect the forest land, and building speculators take possession of the people's commons, and railway monopolies turn us out of house and home, and tunnel into chaos so much of the beautiful as they cannot dig into oblivion? We are speaking of Havering Attebower in the past, when it was yet suggestive of that still remoter time in which Edward, the gloomy Confessor, escaped from the uncongenial pomp of Court and State, and fled thither to his devotions. Here, in the midst of woody solitudes, he lived the life of a recluse in that ancient palace which had belonged to Saxon kings before him; and though the warbling of the nightingales which, according to the old legend, disturbed his holy meditations, was stilled in answer to his prayers, (the birds afterwards remaining outside the Royal park,) the very name of the place was due to him. Who has not heard the story how St. John the Evangelist, disguised as an old beggar, asked alms of the King, who, having nothing at the moment to bestow except the Royal ring, drew that from his finger and gave it him; and how years afterwards two English pilgrims coming from the East, sought an audience of the priestly Monarch at this same place, and returned the gift, with an intimation that he should die before six months had passed? He died, and the Royal bower was thereafter named Have Ring.

All these things Barbara learned next day from a little daughter of the post-mistress, with whom Silas left her, while he himself went on to London.

She never suspected that the little brown-eyed, quiet child that walked with her in the woods and talked so gravely and with such a demure air was set to watch her, and had been told not to lose sight of her companion. Silas himself had shrunk from placing a spy upon her in his absence, and had only asked Mrs. Morland to keep her indoors as much as possible till his return; but that good woman, who, with the exigencies of a general shop combined with the village post-office, had quite enough to do to look after her own affairs, had nodded her head sagely, and half in irritation at being kept in the dark as to her kinswoman's position, half in consequence of a sense of responsibility which she felt was of a delicate kind, called her little daughter to her aid. This young damsel, of eight or nine years, was more discreet even than the busy widow, who, being mostly engaged in the effort to make a decent living out of her shop and in doing the duties of postmistress in a place where about ten letters a month was the regular average, had left her only child pretty much to herself. She was a quaint, reserved little creature, who had learned somehow to live in a world of her own, made, for the most part, out of such few books as she could lay her hands on, and the outdoor solitudes where she would steal away to read them; so that in a few hours she contrived to establish a sort of unexpressed sympathy with her grown-up cousin, whom she regarded as in some mysterious way a heroine to whom she was expected to devote herself. It was, perhaps, because of this strange companionship and the half imaginative prattle of the girl who was her guide in the green lanes and woody by-ways of the country about

Havering that a strange sense, not of indifference, not of peace, but of unreality and mental numbness, came over Barbara. By the afternoon of the third day of her stay there she seemed to have left Fairhoe long behind her. Either past or present might have been a dream, she scarcely knew which; and, except for a vague expectation of Marion Rooke's coming, or of meeting Oswald Fairhoe on the way to her cousin's house, she felt that she might go on in this uncertain, half-waking condition until she lost count of time.

She awoke that night; for, on going home just after the dusk of the evening, she saw her father standing at the door waiting for her.

"Come, Barby—come, my girl!" he said, kindly; "I hope you aren't tired with wandering about in this dull place; for we must be stirring to-night for London, Run in and help Mistress Morland to make some tea for us, and then get ready, and take a warm cloak or a shawl to put about you; for the nights are cold, and we may have to ride outside."

"Why are we going to London, father?" she asked, trembling. "What have we to do there?" The fear of some sudden danger seemed to come upon her; and yet, when she had steadied herself for a minute by leaning against the doorway, she was conscious of a kind of strength—the strength that comes of a hopeless fatalism.

Mrs. Morland was in her element, bustling hither and thither, cutting cold meat, spreading bread and butter, packing up a little parcel of refreshments for the journey, and admonishing her little daughter not to burn the toast which she was holding to the fire. The good woman seemed, perhaps, a little ready to "speed the parting guests;" and, in truth, she was secretly glad to get rid of them. Before tea was half over Barbara left the room, but not till she had beckoned the child to follow her. It was but a signal of the eyebrows, but the sharp little creature saw it in an instant; crammed her last slice of bread-and-butter into her mouth; and, putting her little high stool back into its place, disappeared in a twinkling.

"She have her wits about her now, haven't she?" said Mrs. Morland, admiringly. "Not a moment has she left that poor young thing out of her sight since here she has been."

"There was no need for that, perhaps," said Silas, grimly; "and yet I have to thank you, too, for she might have been followed by those who would undo all that I'm trying to do. You haven't heard of her meeting anybody, Mrs. Morland?"

"No, not a soul—or, at least, not to speak to, except one day, when a gipsy cart was in the road, and then she ran after it and asked the man that was driving if he'd come from Fairhoe; but he hadn't been in that part, and told her so; and then a woman—one of the fortune-telling baggages—wanted to tell her fortune, and the poor thing shrank away and cried, and said she hadn't the heart to hear it; but she gave the woman her silver thimble because she couldn't find a sixpence."

Silas groaned and leaned his head upon his hand, while Mrs. Morland looked keenly at him from over her teacup. "I suppose there's no great harm in asking you," she said presently; "but is she fretting after a young man?"

Silas made a wry face. "I am taking her away partly because I am going away myself, and partly to keep her from carrying on a foolish correspondence with a young man," he answered.

"Ah! I don't know that that'll be much good, poor thing; she seems to me to be taking it to heart; couldn't you get them to wait a bit, and see whether he can make her happy? It's hard work gettin' a home together, you know, and there's few things tries a young man like that. Is he so very much below her?"

"No; he's a great deal too much above her, Mistress Morland—or, at all events, he thinks so."

"Oh! that makes all the difference," replied the widow; "if his intentions isn't honourable, of course my advice is to get her out of the way as quick as possible, and I don't know but what you're right, even to put the sea between them."

"That's my intention, cousin; and now, good-bye, if we never should meet in this world again."

Barbara came down presently, followed by her demure attendant, whose staid and solemn demeanour would never have led anybody to believe that she had a note in her pocket to give to Marion Rooke, in case she came that week. It was a very unsatisfactory note—a mere line, in fact, saying that they were going to London, but containing no information as to what part of the great city they might stay in; but it was something to have written it and confided it to safe keeping.

The quivering, hazy light that hung above the dim black belt afar off showed where the great city lay long before they reached it; but by the road they travelled they seemed to stop short of the source of the light itself.

They left the coach at a large, old-fashioned inn, near the spot whence Barbara had started for Fairhoe only a few days before, and then entered a hackney-carriage, which, after jolting along a broad thoroughfare, twisted round a corner or two and came out into a great open space, but indifferently lighted, and with a great pile of masonry standing, as it seemed, in a deep trench, and showing cold and grey under the glimmering stars. Here the coach pulled up at a flight of steps leading on to a flagged causeway, and opening from the causeway was a house with a green door and a neat brass knocker. The place was Tower Hill, and the house was that of Miss Rummidge, of whom Silas had hired apartments for a week, though he only intended to occupy them for a night or two; for he dreaded the bustle of an hotel, and had determined not to subject his daughter to the pain of saying farewell even to Mrs. Petifer and her husband, much less to the schoolfellows, from whom parting would be even more bitter. He relied on the sudden change and the feeling that it was inevitable, to rouse her from the lethargy into which she seemed to have fallen; and prayed that, even though the first grief might be sharp and violent, it would not long endure.

The passage and part of the landing, as well as her father's sleeping-room, contained several boxes and bales, amongst which she recognised her own chest and the packages which had been sent from Fairhoe. It was evident, then, that he was going far away, and that their stay there would be short. How short she had not time to conjecture; for when Miss Rummidge left the little octagonal sitting-room, in which she had left some bread and cheese and a jug of ale for their refreshment, the old man drew his chair to his daughter's side and took her hand in his. Her heart sank within her, and yet she lay her head upon his shoulder, believing in his great truth and love.

"Barby, my child," he said in a broken voice, "you will go out with me to-morrow to buy such clothes and other comforts as you will need on a long voyage and in another country. Not a foreign country, dear, but another England, and I hope a happier one for both of us. You must get to bed early, little one, that we may be out betimes to-morrow, for the ship works out of dock in three days from this, and we have much to do. Miss Rummidge here will help you to learn what things will be best for sea use; and don't stint, girl, all I have is for you."

"Father, father," she cried, with a great sob, "why must we leave England? Why not go to some other part of the country, and not across the sea? Oh, I cannot go—I cannot. My heart will break."

He bent his brows upon her, and his face set in the sternness of a strong pain, which must yet be conquered at any cost. "If the breaking of my heart would save yours, my daughter," he said, "I would let it break, as it must if I stayed here and saw what must come to me and you. Barbara, my girl, you must banish this weakness from your heart, and at any cost, or it will work your ruin. Had you heard what Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe said to me, you would have given up the thoughts of her son for ever, or you could have had no blood of mine in your veins."

"Oh, father—father, I cannot go, even with you; I love him; he loves me. If you only knew what vows have bound us together! See him yourself before you part us; ask him whether his mother can stand between us; write to him, and ask him to meet you even here."

He sprang up with clenched hands, and a grim, bitter smile upon his face. "What; give him up my one ewe-lamb, to be carried to the shambles of that butcher's family? never! Girl—girl, you know not what manner of people these are; it would be ruin and misery for both of you, perhaps, but certainly for you; yes, and for him too; for I believe that he has the common honesty and honour that even a Fairhoe may have in youth, though they lose it in age. Misery and ruin for both of you, which I must avert by snatching you away. I have the right to do it, Barbara, as your father, who has loved you; aye, and loves you still, better than his life. Do not rebel, my child—my only little one; or, though it should be through years of pain and shame, the curse of disobedience will find you out. I would die sooner than invoke it, Barbara; but the weight of it will surely fall upon you; do not tempt me to speak what that curse will be."

He stood trembling, and with his outstretched hand pointing to her, where she had crouched upon her knees before him, and the perspiration stood in great beads upon his forehead. Even as he spoke with a suppressed force which made his deep voice quiver and his breath come and go, as though he suffered from some violent exertion, the recollection of all the horror that had come upon her on the night of her return was renewed, and she could only clasp her imploring hands, and look wildly up at him. So they gazed at each other for a few moments, without another word, when she fell forward on the floor, and he, going to raise her, found that she had fainted, and carried her upstairs, where he lay her upon the bed, and summoned Miss Rummidge to help her.

More than an hour had passed when the landlady came down, and found him seated in the chair, with his head in his hands. She had to touch him on the arm to rouse him, and then he sprang up and staggered as though he had been drinking.

"The poor, dear young lady was better now," she said, "and was sitting up, looking out at the Tower, and getting a little air, poor thing." He replied that that was well, and went slowly up to his own room, begging Miss Rummidge to sleep with his daughter, and to assure her of his love and prayers for her, a message which the worthy soul delivered, not without wondering at its impressive solemnity for such a slight occasion as a faintness from the fatigue of a twenty-miles journey.

Just as Silas Waine had once sought to solve the question of his duty by a blind appeal to the chances of opening the Bible as a directing text, so his daughter now determined to leave herself in the hands of some sort of chance. She would obey her father in the sense of making no personal effort to escape, or of refusing to accompany him. There would yet be time for Oswald to reach London before they were on their voyage, and whither they were going she had not yet learnt. Before Miss Rummidge was ready for bed, after seeing that the lights were out and the house fastened for the night, a letter had been written to Oswald, bidding him come at once if he desired to see her more in this world. She was desperate, and directed the letter to him at Fairhoe, addressing one at the same time to Marion, at Grundon.

Oh, what a long, heartsick agony she had to undergo after she had slipped these letters into a post-office on the following morning! and yet, with a sort of calm which is the paralysis that comes before the death of hope, she went hither and thither, buying dresses and serviceable shoes and clothing. The excursion was a great holiday for Miss Rummidge, who had not for years had such an opportunity for patronage; and the great advantage of spending the day in this way was the physical fatigue of walking in and out of the various shops. It was evident, however, that the landlady had received some kind of hint, for she took care to keep her companion close to her side; and Silas

Waine himself joined them before they had been out more than an hour—waiting outside the various shops, while they made the purchases, with untiring patience. With what eager, loving care he held his daughter on his arm! and how, at last, when she was so overcome with fatigue that she went to sleep in the hackney coach that he had called to take them home, he held her on his knees as though she was still a child, so that on waking suddenly, as they rumbled over the cobble-stones of Tower Hill, she found his strong arms round her, and her head upon his breast!

It was well that the day's work had tired her, for she slept until the morning sun shone in a great burst of light upon the window of her room, and the tattoo of the drummer calling the soldiers to early drill sounded from the courtyard of the great building opposite. But the light only reminded her that another day must be borne in silent suspense before she could know whether to hope or not; and if *he* should indeed be false to her, should she outlive that pang? If he were true, and that letter found him at Fairhoe, horses and spurs would bring him; and how could she doubt him? It was a chance, and she had some way vowed to abide the issue of it; had set her happiness and perhaps her very life upon the hazard, and so the day went lingering on till noon had deepened into evening, and the shadow crept across the great grey tower as though it were a mighty dial, and her heart felt like a living hour-glass with a drop of blood for every grain of sand, and growing heavier and heavier as the time flowed on.

For the next day and the next the sun rose and set. The shadows fell and vanished. The hours were tolled slowly on the neighbouring church clocks, and neither he nor Marion came. The ship had been delayed a little, so that though all their goods were safely stowed, she was still in dock on the afternoon of another day, when a messenger came to summon them on board.

She had given up all hope now, and in a sort of deadness of heart and body hung upon her father's arm, and clutched it tightly, even long after the shouts of the captain and the oaths and cries of the men at work to warp the vessel out had given place to more quiet orders. The great piles of warehouses, the bales and casks upon the wharves, and the dull, green, slimy water of the dock basin had been left behind; the confused mingling of ropes, and spars, and buckets, and all the seeming inextricable gear upon the deck had been reduced to comparative order by coiling, stacking, slinging, stowing, and a dozen other operations, about which sailors seem so deliberate, but which they really effect with such marvellous rapidity. They were out in the river, and being towed slowly along before the edge of night showed once more across the low-lying shore.

Darker and darker grew the shadows which seemed to come each over each upon the rippling stream, on which the red lights, hoisted on board, flared with a blood-red stain, but evening had deepened into night and the moon threw a track of silver on the rippling pathway of the ship before either Silas Waine or his daughter moved from the place where they had sat down on deck. The old man's face was looking forward into the bright and widening channel that led to the open sea. His daughter watched the last streak of light which was swallowed up in the gloom that lay far behind.

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER THE TENTS.

By the time that Marion Rooke reached the bend of the road, after her interview with Mr. Swiffle, the morning had advanced to the time when most of the people about Grundon were astir and carts were coming along the road quite briskly, so that, to avoid the gossip and questioning to which she was pretty sure to be subject, the market-woman turned into a narrow footpath leading to the fields on the other side of a tall hedge, and there sat down patiently enough, just within sight of the upper windows of the steward's cottage, to wait for the doctor's return from the house at Fairhoe. The blinds of those upper windows were still drawn, or she would have ventured to cross over the roadway and inquire after Barbara, for she had reached the meeting-place a full half hour before the appointed time. As it was, she sat near an opening in the hedge through which she could watch the cottage and the road. On the latter, and approaching the place where she sat, two persons came presently—a man and a woman—talking as they walked leisurely in the shadow of the stunted trees that overhung the path. At a distance of several yards they stopped, still speaking in so low a tone that no word could be overheard; but Marion knew the woman, though her veil was drawn down over her face. She was by no means surprised to recognise Miss Mittens. She had identified her companion as Ralph Fairhoe at the first glimpse of their approaching figures.

Her attention was diverted from them by a sound which came from the side of the hedge where she was seated, but at some little distance beyond the point at which they were standing in the roadway. Almost any stranger would have mistaken the clear ringing whistle for the note of a bird, but of a large bird, with a full, mellow cry. Marion knew the signal, and was scarcely surprised to see the gipsy, Rory Lee, creep out from a clump of weeds and run swiftly but silently towards her, stooping low, that he might be concealed from the view of anybody in the road. He carried his laced boots in his hand, his bare feet making no sound upon the grass; and as he came near he pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. Marion nodded in reply, and beckoned him to her side, where he sat listening intently, but without speaking a word.

"Ah!" he whispered, presently; "he doesn't tell her what he's found out, and she'll keep a watch without knowin' why, if she hasn't learnt it a'ready."

"Could you hear what they said, Rory?" asked Marion, in surprise.

"Yes; but there aren't many as could," replied the young savage, showing his glittering teeth and holding his curled side locks away from the ear that was bent towards the hedge. "I could hear a mole burrow, I believe, if I was half across the field. What else am I good for if it isn't for eyes and ears, and—well perhaps, for a light hand and a quick foot?" he added, grinning.

"What does he want with her, then? Tell me."

"He says how he wants to find out what's Master Oswald's talk now that he's layin' sick; and if she couldn't get to keep watch in his room; but she tells him no, for Madam's back, and she and the soldier keeps watch in turns with a London nurse that has all her meals in the dining-room with them. He tells her to look after that nurse, then, and to let him know if anything happens, and what messages comes to the hall; but he don't tell her what he's learnt of Gaffer this morning. Old Gaffer's a fool, and can't keep his teeth shut; but then he didn't know that it was like to anger you, and I shouldn't neither, but for my being told what you and Reuben owed to him yonder, and what liking you both bore to the old man and this lily-faced wench, his daughter. Mistress Rooke!—Marion!" he continued suddenly, and with a change of face and manner that was only half-expressed by his concentrated whisper, "I don't know that I wouldn't go through fire and blood for that gold-haired wench myself; and if I could find out that Oswald Fairhoe's done her deadly wrong, I——" his glittering eyes and the sharp, sudden clenching of his little, lean, brown hand finished the sentence in dumb show.

"Rory, Rory, you're dreaming, boy!" said Marion. "What's come upon you? You'll have a wife amongst your own folk one day without taking a stranger into the tents. Beside, Barbara Waine is out of the question. Wrong or no wrong, I know that the worst evil that could befal her would be for hurt to come near Oswald Fairhoe."

"Well, then, what does him yonder mean to do when he has asked all the questions he has put to old Gaffer this mornin', and found out about the child that was with her when she fell into a faint, two nights ago, down by the river side?"

Marion looked gravely at the boy, and, in her agitation, would have risen; but he held her by the arm, and motioned with his head towards the place from which Ralph Fairhoe was now advancing, his companion having disappeared, on her way back to the hall. The former paused for a moment, as if uncertain what to do, as he looked up at the steward's cottage, from the windows of which no blind had been yet withdrawn; and then, glancing sharply on each side, struck into the path leading to the garden gate, and, after walking round to both sides of the cottage, peering at the windows, knocked at the door with the handle of his riding-cane. There was no response, and he had just walked backward a little that he might look for some signs of life in the rooms above, when some one called to him from the road. It was a man carrying a square bundle or parcel, with a letter slipped under the string.

"Hallo! master," said the fellow; "there's nobody at home there. It aint o' no use knockin'. Not a soul in th' ouse. Master Waine and Miss Barbara went a journey last night, as I know by this here parcel left for me to take on to Grundon."

"Stop a minute," returned Ralph; "let me look at it. You know where they've gone, I suppose. Eh?" he added, sharply, as he came up with his informant and put his hand upon the bundle which he carried.

"No, I do' know," replied the other, moving a little away from him (he was a new hand on one of the farms, and knew nothing of Ralph); "but maybe the man as druv the sheay, he might be back to-night an' tell ye, if you want to know. He belong to Farmer Cartwright, he do, and his name's Ben, if I mind it properly."

Ralph had read the address upon the note, and now caught hold of the parcel once more. "Look here, my man," he said; "I'm going on to Grundon, and I'll carry this parcel for you, if you like. I know Marion Rooke very well."

"No, no. So do I know her, master, and I'm bound to carry this my own self. I passed my word to Master Waine that I'd give it to no hand but her'n, and dom'd if I have you to touch it."

"Look here, my fine fellow," said Ralph, taking out his purse; "I'll give you five shillings to leave that parcel and letter with me to take to Grundon; or, if you're so particular, you can meet me here in an hour and take them yourself. I have a reason for wanting to know what there is inside."

The man seemed to hesitate; but, in truth, his eyes were wandering beyond Ralph, towards the road, where Marion, who had heard her own name mentioned, had just come along the path.

"You must follow Ralph Fairhoe, and watch him, for he means some mischief," she said to Rory. "I shall be in the market again at noon. Come to me there, and tell me where he has been and what is to do."

The gipsy nodded, and, crouching down under the hedge, waited as patiently as though he had set a net for a bird and held the string in his hand.

Ralph turned and saw the market woman, and uttered a bitter curse; but before she reached them he thought he would try a change of tactics by beckoning to her, especially as he would, by an appearance of friendliness, have a chance of learning what had become of Waine and his daughter.

"Oh! it is you, Mistress Rooke," he said, with an ill-assumed smile, which, being spoiled in the process of manufacture, turned into a grin like that seen on a pantomime mask; "this good fellow has a parcel here for you from the steward's daughter, and I was cautioning him not to give it to anybody but yourself."

"You're a loiar, come now," retorted the labourer, who was an honest, quarrelsome fellow; "for you was a moortal mind to get it to yourself, an' wanted me to gie it up; but no, sez I, dom'd if I gie it to any but Marion Rooke, not for nobody nor no money."

"Ah! I did that to try whether you were a trusty messenger; you were quite right, my fine fellow, here's a shilling for you."

"Will you take the bundle wi' you, or shall I carry it on to th' market for ye?" said the man to Marion; "take care anyhow that he don't get it from ye," he added, leering at Ralph and pocketing the shilling, as he gave up the bundle and slouched away.

"You can tell me where old Waine is, I dare say?" said Ralph, as Marion stood looking up at the house but without opening the letter, which she had slipped into the pocket of her market apron. There's no need for you to be so unfriendly to me—let bygones be bygones; I want you to help me, for my nephew's sake and the girl's sake too. What has become of her and of the child?"

"What child?"

"Oh! come now, let us understand each other. I came down two nights ago to seek you; sent a messenger beforehand to ask you to be at the Load of Hay; and then, through some devilry or other, there were words between us because of that brother of yours. By some other devilry my horse falls lame, and here I am, till now, off and on, finding out all that you could have told me in five minutes. I tell you I'm the friend of all parties—of Oswald Fairhoe, who is lying over there in a fever; of old Waine and his pretty daughter; of my sister-in-law, Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe——"

"And of her waiting-maid, Miss Mittens," interrupted Marion, with a scornful laugh.

Ralph's face writhed, but he grinned to hide his vexation. "Well," he said, "she could tell me some things that you refused to mention; and I must find out where this girl and the child are in hiding before Oswald is on his legs again."

"You say that it is out of friendship for Silas Waine and his daughter," said the market-woman, looking at him steadily. "When has the steward grasped your hand since that night when your father lay dead?"

"Damn that night!" he retorted, stamping on the path with his boot-heel and grinding his teeth; "what have you to do with anything that took place then? I ask you, will you give me the information I want? If not, I warn you that I shall find out all I seek to know, and then it will be the worse for some of you." He was losing the mastery of himself, and, with the mean rage that sordid souls feel at being thwarted, began to threaten. There was nothing reputable about Ralph Fairhoe: he was a small scoundrel, and even his worst villany was of a poor, unheroic sort.

"You'll do your worst, whatever it is, I dare say," said Marion; "but don't ask me to help you by word or sign. I owe nothing to you or yours, and our ways are different. Take which road you will, and I will take the other."

He gave her no answer, but with a wave of the hand which might have been a menace, so full of evil meaning was the look that accompanied it, turned and walked away at a rapid pace.

When he had gone a hundred yards or so, the shrilly, mellow piping of a blackbird sounded from the hedge, and when he had turned the bend in the road Rory leaped into the dry ditch and followed, like a dog upon the scent.

With a sense of baffled rage and smouldering hate, Ralph Fairhoe pursued his walk to Grundon, without noticing that he was followed. At the end of the road which led past a few straggling cottages to the street wherein Dr. Letsom's surgery stood, Rory, who having pulled on his boots again, drew his cap down over his brow, and thrust his hands deep down into his breeches-pockets, took advantage of a passing market-cart to get some distance in front, where, from the convenient shelter of the gateway of a stable-yard he could watch unperceived.

Master Swiffle's ideas were all sent wool-gathering by the appearance of Ralph Fairhoe's head above the window-blind at the very moment when he was arranging a most politic course of cross purposes, and he could only just summon enough self-possession to say, "Oh! good morning, sir; you're an early visitor for professional advice," when the head came in at the door, and, after the sharp ting of the bell, the body and legs followed.

He had very little to tell after all; but had he been possessed of a dozen secrets, he would have been led on to disclose them. Poor shallow rogue, he was soft and squeezable as an orange in the practised hands of his artful questioner. He felt this himself, and tried to make a stand against the threatening tone assumed by Ralph in the first instance; but it was of no use. His visitor apologised, pleaded the deep interest he had in the inquiries, disavowed any intention of prying into professional secrets, and, in short, fooled him the other way to the top of his bent. It ended in his asking Ralph to step into Mr. Letsom's private room where, after he had shut the door, he related to him what he had heard on the previous night. It wasn't much; indeed, it appeared to him that he had told nothing that the other had not learned already; but he had at all events mentioned where the child had been placed at nurse.

Had the doctor's assistant paused on his way to the inner room to look through the glass of the surgery-door, he might have caught a glimpse of a face at one of the panes, a dark, bright-eyed, small-featured face, with gold ear-rings in the brown ears, and glistening side locks hanging down at the temples. As it was, both he and his companion were too much absorbed to notice anything of the kind, and so Rory watched them into the inner room, and then set himself gently to open the door that he might follow them. His sharp ear had detected the click of the latch and the tingle of the bell that followed it, and it was necessary to get in without such warning. This was a difficulty easily surmounted, however; for though the bell hung above, and inside the door, the latter could be opened a hand's breadth before it operated on the catch. In less time than it takes to tell it the lithe gipsy was standing with his toe upon the moulding of the passage wainscot, one lean brown hand clutching by the top of the partly-opened door, and the other muffling the clapper of the bell with a torn handkerchief. In another moment he had crawled like a cat round the counter, and was crouching on the floor, listening intently to what passed within the room. Quick as he was, he was almost caught, however; for no sooner did Ralph hear where the child was to be found than he was in a hurry to depart. His hand was on the lock before Rory could reach the street. When he and the assistant came out together they saw a young fellow, in a country dress, sitting in a chair, which was placed for the convenience of patients, fast asleep, with his face buried in his arms as he leant upon the counter.

"Hullo! what do you want?" said Mr. Swiffle, stirring him up with a pestle, which he took from a mortar at his side. "What's the matter; you ain't in a fit, are you?"

"Eh—oh—ah—noa, not as I know on," said Rory, waking up, and rubbing his eyes in such a way that he contrived to keep his hands before his face. I come for some doctor's stuff, that 's what I 'm wantin'; somethin' as 'ull cure me o' what I got the matter wi' me; an' now I 'll just tell ye what that there is ——"

"Good day," said Ralph; "he 'll keep you some time, and I 've no more to say," and away he went.

"Is Master Letsom at home?" said Rory suddenly, looking quite wide-awake; "because, if not ——"

"I shall do just as well," replied Master Swiffle, with dignity. "One doctor's enough, isn't he; you don't want a pair of us."

"No, no; I don't want a pair, but only one of ye, and that 's Master Letsom; so I 'll come by-and-by, when he 's at home."

"Hi! Stop! Come back, will you?" said the assistant, running to the door; but Rory had got half-way up the street, in the wake of Ralph Fairhoe, and the surgery could not be left to take care of itself.

Quite at the other end of the town, in one of a small cluster of cottages, lived the woman to whom Marion had taken Barbara's child. It was a poor place enough, but clean and tidy; and when Ralph entered, the father of the family was sitting at breakfast, while his wife was nursing the little stranger which had been confided to her care. They were poor people, and honest as the world goes; but the man had been out of work, and the meal to which they sat down was scanty. No wonder, then, that a sovereign from a gentleman who announced himself as a relative of the lady from whom Marion Rooke had received the child was a golden key to unlock their confidence.

It would be necessary, he said, for the little creature to be taken to its mamma, who was pining to see it if only for an hour or two; and a woman servant, perhaps not Marion Rooke, but one equally to be trusted, would come for it that evening. It would be brought back again early in the morning, of course, and would the good woman feed it before it was taken away? Such a considerate, familiar, liberal gentleman neither the bricklayer nor his wife had ever seen; and then that sovereign, what wouldn't it buy? Ralph thought that, at all events, it would buy his nephew's child, and so give him a hold upon the house and land of Fairhoe, according to some plans which he had not yet determined on.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DEAD HEART.

MARION ROOKE stood looking up in surprise at the closed windows of the steward's cottage, wondering what could have been the reason for the sudden flight of Silas Waine and his daughter.

For several minutes she forgot the note which she had slipped into her pocket unopened, and had only hastily read it when she heard a heavy step upon the pathway, and Sergeant Cobbold stood before her, hot and flushed and carrying his hat in his hand.

"It isn't true, is it?" he asked, quite out of breath. "They've not really gone away for good, and him lyin' there only half sensible? If you're not bound by a promise, what *is* the meaning of it all? and why is there any reason for keeping of it secret if he's like to die? Such things don't fit well when a man comes to the last; and unless Master Oswald mends, it may be very near his time."

"I know no more than you do, I dare say," replied Marion. "Read this letter, and then tell me what you think."

The soldier took the note and read it, holding it a long way off, as though he could somehow gather its meaning better by having a clear space between the words and his eye; but no meaning came of it, and he only shook his head slowly. "I don't know what to make of it all," he said. "The young master's been talking, on and off, sometimes what seems to be sensible, and then mixin' it all up with what can't be made no sense out of. That was before madam, his mother, came down. Since then he says but little, except when the doctor's there, and then his cry is all to be got up. 'Doctor, when can you get me up and on my legs again?' he says, this morning. 'I've a matter of life and death to attend to—yes, of life and death,' he says; and then he begins moaning like to himself, and goes off into a kind of stupor. He's partly sensible, too; and knows when Mrs. Fairhoe's in the room, following her about with his eyes all the time he's awake, and sayin' never a word, not even in his light-headedness, about the child when she's by. She ought to be told, I'm certain; for it's my belief that it's this struggle goin' on in his mind that's killing him. I've been about to ask the doctor times without number, but something stopped me. If *he* only knew all about it now, he might break it to madam more gently than I could do, even if I wasn't bound by my word to Master Oswald. I've known Master Oswald," said the honest soldier, twitching his grizzled whisker to conceal the working of his face, "ever since he was a little fellow no higher than my knee, and when I wasn't much better than a lad myself; and it was me that brought madam the ill news of his father's death, when I'd seen him put into the cemetery, after he fell down, close by me, at Waterloo. And yet, if you'll believe me, I don't believe that that proud lady took what I had to tell her then more to heart than she'd take this other news about her son, No—the doctor'd better do it, if he will."

"Here he comes," said Marion, as she heard the sound of a horse's hoofs upon the road.

Mr. Letsom drew rein directly he saw them talking together, and though he came on at a walking pace in answer to Marion's impatient signal, there was a queer dissatisfied look upon his face when he at last rode up to the gate.

"What's the matter?" said Marion. "Is anything wrong over yonder? He's not worse?"

"No; a little better, if anything."

"I'm glad you haven't gone on straight home, for Ralph Fairhoe is at your house by this time, and it will be as well to loiter a little on the road."

"I'll get down," he said; "and then we can walk along together, and you can tell me all about it. Swiffle shall go," he said, when he had heard of that gentleman's peculiarities. "I don't think you're quite up to dispensing, are you, Marion? But you can soon learn, and then I'll do without an assistant altogether till we can afford to have a house away from the surgery. It isn't very hard work, and we shall want his room for another servant."

"What are you talking about, sir? Nonsense, Mr. Letsom; this is no time for going on in that way. I must get ready for a journey, and somebody must take my stall in the market for a day or two. Is there any hope of Mr. Oswald being about again by that time?"

There was very little hope of Oswald being out of doors in less than a week, he told her; he was so feeble that he could scarcely hold a cup of drink to his lips; and, though he had given orders to allow him to get up and sit by the open window while his bed was made that morning, he was still in a confused and depressed state, and quite unable to walk across the room without help. He had shown some power to rally before his mother came home; but on the very evening of her arrival a reaction had come on, and whenever she was in the room he lay like a dying man, except that his fingers clutched the bedclothes and he seemed to be making some violent effort of self-control. She persisted in helping to nurse him; but on the previous night he had asked her to leave him with the doctor, who had stayed by his bedside for two hours, when he sank into a fitful sleep, from which he awoke with less of fever, and with the wandering light which had been in his eyes almost subdued. Then Letsom had tried to rouse him to some sense of Barbara's danger, and had succeeded; but he said nothing except to entreat that any means might be used to give him strength to seek her.

"Then I must go off to Havering before the time that she gives me," said Marion, "and bring her back with me, even if it be by force. He may die!"

"He may, indeed," replied the doctor; "but I don't think he will. He has youth on his side, and youth and strength, with nourishment and nursing, will do more than all the physic mentioned in the Pharmacopœia, or, as you would call it, 'the herbal,' Marion."

They parted at the end of the street, the doctor going straight home, and Marion hurrying to her stall in the market.

"Oh, by the bye, Swiffle!" said Mr. Letsom, after he had made some inquiries of his assistant, "when Mr. Ralph Fairhoe calls next time I'll prescribe for him myself. I didn't bargain for your having a private practice."

Mr. Swiffle winked his pink-edged eyes a few dozen times and breathed hard, but he answered never a word.

Before Marion had been at her stall more than half an hour, she saw Rory, perched upon an empty waggon, deep in conversation with one of the leather-gaitered horse-dealing fraternity, who were hanging about the outskirts of the market with a pony or two, in the hope of doing some business with a stray farmer or shopkeeper in want of a nag for a light cart.

Catching sight of her, he made a sign with his hand, and, after exchanging a few more words with his companion, leaped lightly down, and went across the little paved area in the centre of the market to the place were she was already busy with her baskets and packages.

"You haven't had any breakfast, lad," she said, pointing to a great chunk of bread and a piece of fresh butter which lay wrapped in a clean cloth on a shelf behind her. "Go you to the market-house and get a pint of ale, and then come back and sit ye down on that basket o' t'other side the counter, and tell me all about it."

It would never do, she knew, to let Rory stand beside her behind that log table, and in close proximity to the money pocket of her apron, and to handy fowls and fruit. Not that he would have stolen the value of a halfpenny from her; but if her example should ever induce others to trust him, and he once had a chance of "taking" anything from a stranger and an alien to Fairhoe and the tribe, his slender fingers would move too deftly for his own advantage, and he might get into trouble and bring her name into evil repute.

As it was, his eyes glinted shiftily from basket to basket, as she set out chickens and butter in snowy linen wrappers, and filled the other divisions of her stall with choice fruit and vegetables; for Marion had a dainty taste in arrangement, and what she dealt in was a selection of the best that the neighbouring country could supply, so that she had mostly the gentlefolk of Grundon for her customers, and few select and special festivals came off in the town until she had been consulted as to the probable supply of provisions for the dinner or the supper table. It might have made many a virtuous mouth water to look at the downy poultry, the ripe fruit, the crisp, fresh vegetables, the semi-transparent eggs, and the soft, creamy butter that lay there ready for assimilation by human beings; and it was no wonder, therefore, that

Rory stopped now and then in the process of cutting huge chunks and wedges of bread and butter with his pocket-knife, or even while he was drinking peered over the edge of his ale-jug, noting the largest and plumpest birds with an eager glance. But he knew that he himself was noted, too, by that other pair of deep dark eyes behind the counter, and as the market-woman disposed the last bright, glowing apple on a pyramid of gleaming crimson and amber, and in the act looked at him with a smile and a shake of the head, the gipsy's white teeth shone in a grin, while a very keen observer might have imagined that the ruddy glow which shone through his own bright brown cheeks deepened by the slightest shadow of a shade as he shut up his clasp-knife and dropped it into a side pocket of his fustian jacket.

"Now, Rory, tell me all about it," said Marion, wiping her hands on a cloth, and leaning over to him, so that he need not speak in a tone which would attract attention.

There was very little to tell, but it was necessary to act upon the information quickly.

"Where is Thyrza Lee?" she asked, presently; "she hasn't gone away from Fairhoe."

"Where's Thyrza Lee? why, in Grundon, here; you know that her husband's away northward and that she's basketmaking, and what not. In the High Street you'll find her, with the caravan all hung with brooms and baskets, and such ware. You know the chap that we call Jem the Bellows, that sells by auction at the fairs? he's in the trade just now, and

Thyrza comes to Grundon with him to-day—him at the horse's head and she handling the money. Shall I fetch her? If I was you I'd——" and here he glanced quickly round, and stooping over the board, whispered into Marion's ear.

The market-woman nodded, "That's what I mean," she said; "but, Rory, d'ye think Thyrza's safe?"

"Safe? yes; if it's to spite anybody; and, more than that, if——" he dexterously tossed a penny into the air, and, even while it spun caught it, and made it vanish from his open palm. It was an expressive piece of pantomime.

"Fetch her then, Rory, before the customers come in," said Marion.

He was half across the market-place when he thought of something, and turned back. "I say," he whispered, "I had almost forgot, I was talking to one of the horsemongers' men just now, and he's come from London. He saw the old man there only two days ago."

"What old man?"

"Her father, Waine. Up at Smithfield, with a little lot that he'd took to market on pony day, and, going along the street leading off that way, he came upon him outside a shop buying all sorts of things for the farm. Not this farm here; but picks, and spades, and such like, with maybe a hatchet and a rough set of garden tools or so, fit, says he, for work over there in Australia."

"Who said so?"

"Why, the old man, surely. And this chap, as was one of them at the Load of Hay t'other night, tells me of it, becos, says he, I minded that he belonged down there to Fairhoe, where I'd seen him often, talkin' to one or another, and now he's off across seas."

"Make haste, Rory, and fetch Thyrza Lee. I must have this done before I start off for Havering, to bring mother and child together."

That afternoon, the wooden house on wheels, all hung round with brushes and baskets, went at a slow pace down Grundon High Street, the horse led by Jem the Bellows, and Thyrza Lee walking behind on the look-out for customers. There were few people in the labourers' cottages who could afford to buy brooms and baskets such as the gipsy had to sell; but they now and then bargained for a tub or a wooden bowl, and the caravan was pulled up at the entrance to one of the narrowest lanes, down which she went, glancing sharply, right and left, for a head at a window, or for some idle gossip lounging at a door.

But it was market day, and, what was more to the purpose, washing-day, with the people in these cottages. The elder children had mostly been sent to the market-stalls, to pick up such poor bargains from the morning's remnants as would furnish a dinner for the next day; the younger brats were either safely shut inside the rooms, or were assembled on a little muddy strip of waste building-land which formed their play-ground; most of the women were slopping and swishing over the wash-tubs in their back yards, or clinking about in pattens in their little sheds of out-houses, with a great bustle and excitement, which seemed to find expression in a cloud of steam. Among the latter was Mrs. Lambert, the bricklayer's wife, whose husband, having got a job, had gone off to work, and was to be rewarded with a clean shirt on the following Sunday. She was in high spirits was Mrs. Lambert, for she still had seventeen shillings out of the sovereign that Ralph Fairhoe had given her, and they had all had a good breakfast, which was a sufficiently uncommon event to have led to a little family rejoicing. This satisfaction on Mrs. Lambert's part, took the form of a general desire to clean up the house, and she had set to work in earnest, so that the place was as neat as such a poor place could well be made, especially as it was in that condition of dilapidated newness which is peculiar to labourers' cottages that have been built by contract for a speculation. The children had been sent out of the way, and were now divided between the market and the common, in the care of the two elder girls. The little stranger had been duly "nursed," and was fast asleep on a pillow, which served him for a bed, right in the middle of Mrs. Lambert's four-poster, the sole remaining evidence of her father's gentility before he went into the market-gardening, and so became bankrupt. Everything was quiet, so quiet that Mrs Lambert could hear the gipsy-woman crying, "D'ye want a bowl, or a tub, or a basket to-day!" as she passed the door, and was half minded to change a shilling for the purchase of a new broom; but she let her pass on without notice, lest she should wake the child with the noise of the latch.

A lighter hand than hers had lifted it, however, and a foot without a patten had crept to the side of the four-poster.

"What a nice long sleep he's a havin,' a pretty," said Mrs. Lambert, as she hung out the last of her wash upon the clothes-line in the back yard. And so he was; but it was inside the caravan which was then well on its way to Fairhoe, with Jem the Bellows sitting on the shaft smoking his pipe and thinking of the fat fowl that had come off Marion Rooke's stall for his especial benefit.

A week had passed before Oswald Fairhoe rose from the bed where he had tossed in that sickness of heart and brain the symptom of which is bodily fever. As he lay there in the long stupor which succeeds the excitement of disease, or with every nerve active and awake to the distant sounds in the old house, he was oppressed by the heavy burden of that one secret which must not be whispered to his mother, who had come home to nurse him, and grudged that he should receive help from any hands but hers. Through all this pain and weariness, when his temples throbbed, and his hot, restless hands plucked and grappled at the coverlet, or when he lay like a human figure petrified, his eager eyes watched not for her coming but for her absence; and yet between these two so divided, there was a love as true and abiding as that which had come between them to embitter both their lives. Dreary as the old house was when he lay there before she came home, and the sergeant sat like a sentry at his post by the bedside in the darkened room, it was more bearable than that dread exercise of self-control when brain and tongue were continually striving to break through the restraint imposed upon them. For he had bound over Robert Cobbold to secresy, and could mention Barbara's name or let his wandering fancies babble in imperfect speech, but when Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe's stately presence rustled hither and thither, a shadow seemed to come upon him which repressed all utterance.

He thought so at least; but at those times, when he fancied he heard words in the rustling of the dry, red leaves, through which the autumn wind played, or saw the subject of his thoughts written upon the walls as the sunlight that danced upon the hangings of the room gave place to the feeble flicker of the night-light, he really spoke the thoughts which he imagined were thus interpreted. And yet he only gave utterance to so much of the subject of his love for the steward's daughter as his mother had learned already; of his real relation to her, and of the child that should have been the bond to make it indissoluble, not a word escaped him. With an almost desperate determination, which it would have been well for him to have been able to exercise in his hours of health and sanity, he shut these things in his heart, and, with a weakness still more desperate than his strength, waited for the time to utter them. The house itself felt oppressive to him, as it did on the day when he first went to it a child, to learn the meaning of death and its associations with those black trappings and sable suits that had long afterwards seemed to leave their shadows on the place. It is true that the family history, which had been taught him by his mother before he had set foot upon the threshold, was inseparably connected with the house and land; in some sort each nook and corner of the building may be said to have been an ancestral chronicle; but it had no early personal associations to endear it to him.

The shadow that rested upon it when he first went there from the gay suite of rooms in which they had lived at Belfast, seemed now to his disordered fancy to have followed him ever since, and to have lengthened as the day of his life went on.

In the sad time after the news of his father's death, in the singular seclusion of his early boyhood, in those vacations—they could scarcely be called holidays—when he came from the vivid and vigorous life, which belongs even to the quietest of public schoolboys, to the dull privacy and gloomy silence that seemed to hush even the very fields and woods around Fairhoe, the sense of this darkening influence had grown upon him.

And now it had culminated. The darkness had swallowed up past and future alike. As he lay there, gnawed with remorse, he felt the light of life go out: his very heart died within him.

When he was at last able to crawl down stairs by the aid of the broad baluster, and enter the room which he called his own, the days seemed suddenly to have grown wet and chill. The creeper that shadowed the window had been stripped by the wind that went moaning round the house at night, and had helped to add to the mass of withering leaves that choked the garden paths and gathered in sodden heaps upon the trim borders.

There was something congenial to him in this, as well as in the bare and chilling aspect of the room itself. As he threw himself on the dilapidated couch, drawn up before a sputtering wood fire, and let his eye dwell upon the naked walls, the scanty furniture, and all the sordid details of that poor apartment, he seemed to receive a mental stimulus. The air seemed fresher there somehow, and he could breathe freely for the first time for many days, now that he had locked his door and felt that he was alone.

It was well for him that this was so, for if ever he needed some strengthening influence, he needed it then, to prepare him for what was to come. Before he had sat long his glance wandered to the table which stood beneath the window, and he saw that a square parcel had been placed upon it, to which a letter was attached by the string. He went to examine it, not without one of those instinctive forebodings which peculiarly belong to that condition in which his illness had left him. He knew the writing in which the letter was addressed, and the first shock of a calamity fell upon him. Had he been less weak or more hopeful it would have stricken him down more surely. The letter was from Silas Waine, dated simply from London, and saying that he and his daughter had left Fairhoe for ever for another land, almost for another world, where they both might learn to forget the past and escape from the disgrace and misery with which the future had seemed to be threatened.

That was all. Oswald turned in vain to seek on the next page some explanation of the steward's reasons for his abrupt departure. It was evident that Barbara had kept her secret as he had kept his; and even now she might be separated from him by miles of sea, on a journey from which she could never return. The rest of the letter referred only to the parcel which accompanied it—the accounts of Silas Waine's stewardship for the three generations in which he had served the family of Fairhoe. The old man claimed to have done justly; and, indeed, he had exceeded the bounds of mere justice, having left the estate the better for a long series of arduous services and strict economies which had not necessarily formed part of his work, and had, after all, been insufficient to atone for the niggardliness which kept his old master from improving the land, or the extravagance through which Oswald's mother had added to the mortgages upon its acres.

This intelligence seemed to add little to the dead weight that pressed upon him, and he was not stunned by the blow. He was beyond being mortally wounded by any weapon now—resembling in this those men who in the old legends are said to have borne a charmed life only when life was valueless.

Out of all the confused rush of grief and trouble there came but one distinct purpose. He would go to London and try, if by any means he could discover whither they had fled. Nothing should stay him from that, at all events. Almost mechanically, he tied the account-books together again and locked them in a drawer; then he slipped the letter into his pocket, and went up stairs with a sudden strength which seemed to come of the determination of despair.

On the landing he met Ralph Fairhoe coming out of the drawing-room, and in answer to his surprised questioning, replied only that important affairs summoned him at once to London. There was that in his look and manner which forbade further inquiry; but he paused at the door of his bed-room, and said, "If you would do me *one* favour, have the horse put to the light chaise and ask Cobbold to get ready to go with me."

It was no part of Ralph Fairhoe's plan to throw away the chance which he saw this afforded to him of gaining some further knowledge of his nephew's secret; and Oswald had no sooner closed the door than he re-entered the drawing-room to inform his sister-in-law of what he had just heard and to offer to accompany her son upon his journey.

There was much that was in favour of such an arrangement. It would be dangerous for Oswald to go alone; and though Ralph Fairhoe was, she knew, a *mauvais sujet*, she believed that he yet had sufficient loyalty to keep his nephew out of the harm she most feared—a meeting with Barbara and a renewal of that intimacy which she had been at so much pains to destroy.

Her anxiety on this point was almost dispelled, however, when Oswald came in presently, in hat and greatcoat, and carrying a small leather valise in his hand.

"Nobody knows what's become of Cobbold," said Ralph, "but Mrs. Fairhoe thinks you'd better take the close carriage. I will go with you, Oswald, and if I can't help you in the business on hand, I can at least ask you home to my chambers, where I can promise you a supper and a bed, without consigning you in your weak state to a hotel among strangers."

Mrs. Fairhoe said not a word, but her whole face bore a mingled expression of imperious demand and eager entreaty as she looked at her son. For once his eye met hers without wavering, and as he took out the steward's letter and placed it in her hand she felt that she was powerless to stay him. The letter, too, gave her little cause to fear. There was small chance of Waine and his daughter being still in England, and she had received yet earlier information of their departure in the letter which Barbara had written to Oswald, which now lay intercepted in her dressing-case.

"You will not stake everything—your love for me, your family possessions, your birth, pride, credit, and ties of kindred—for this one wild fancy, Oswald? You will not follow this girl and her father across the world, and leave me utterly lonely?" she said, laying her hand upon his arm.

"I go now," he said, "to London in the hope that they have not yet left England. Wherever they may be, if I can find them, they must return." And, without another word, he kissed her, and was gone, leaving her proud spirit rankling with a sense of the meanness and degradation of which she had been guilty in keeping that other letter from him.

CHAPTER XIV.

AMINA.

The reader will have studied human nature to very little purpose if he thinks that a sorrow such as that which had fallen upon Oswald Fairhoe was likely to be fatal. People who have adopted that peculiar form of selfishness which leads them to seclusion and a want of interest in the ordinary concerns of the rest of mankind may nurse a sentimental grief, and may even persuade themselves that they are altogether broken down, and are only waiting for a slow and lingering death; but they survive. Had he been a girl at boarding-school, with the sickly fever of novel-reading at its worst crisis, all might have been well, since he would have lacked the opportunity of carrying his romantic selfishness into action; but he was a man with a man's opportunities, and some of a man's strength of will, in personifying his dreams; and he had drifted on and carried another poor innocent heart with him, away from that mere dreamland into the real gulf of life, where both were in danger of shipwreck. Well, the wreck had come—the last leaf had been turned, and here was the tragic end. So he thought, as he sat beside Ralph Fairhoe in the carriage that bore him swiftly to London; and yet, in all the bitter anguish that the reflection cost him, he dwelt more on his own sufferings, as the hero of the dismal story, than of her whose truer and better history had been ruined by the sweet romantic wooing with which he had deceived himself and her. Weaker or stronger in head and heart, all might have been well; but he had heart enough to befool his intellect, and yet not love enough to lead him to the heroic achievements of self-sacrifice. He would have died for her, he thought; and he repeated this to himself, unconscious of the absurdity when he had never dared to live for her, in manly trust and hope. Even while he writhed in impatient fury he was conscious of his very writhing, and, perhaps unknowingly, imparted to it an heroic air—writhed gracefully, like a man in a poem. Had he been still at Fairhoe, he would have wandered into the woods, and cast himself down upon the ground and wept and beaten his forehead, and yet have done it all not without being conscious of the poetical fitness of such modes of expression. As it was, the sense of motion, the fresh air, the very excitement of the journey, seemed somehow, by mere physical influences, to alleviate his grief; and he resented this—persisted in nursing his wretchedness in the approved manner; and, in short, pitied himself where he was most despicable, despising that very touch of nature and true manhood within him which alone made him worthy of compassion.

The night had set in dim and wet before they reached the outskirts of the great city, and the rain plashed from the housetops and pattered ceaselessly in the little pools in the roadway, as they entered the suburb. Oswald would have commenced his search that night, and was for plunging out of the carriage, and making all sorts of wild inquiries in the neighbourhood of the docks; but his uncle assured him that it would be useless, and, by representing that any such step would only put the steward on his guard, at last persuaded him to drive to an hotel and refresh himself after his journey.

"For, no doubt, the old beggar has feathered his nest pretty snugly out of your money, and he'll be glad to keep out of the way," said Ralph, utterly unable to refrain from vilifying the man whom he had both hated and feared, and hoping that he had indeed gone past recall.

He was sorry that he had spoken so freely; for they had just alighted at the door of a snug private hotel lying off the Strand, and Oswald turned upon him sharply enough.

"You can have very little knowledge of the man of whom you speak, sir," he said, angrily; in fact, he had all along resented Ralph's interference; "and though I thank you for your consideration in coming with me on this journey, I must beg that you leave me alone on this painful duty. It is one that nobody, not even my dearest friend, can help me in; and that reminds me that I must send a note to an old schoolfellow at once. May I beg that you will make use of the carriage to take you home, and that you will excuse me if I stay here for to-night at all events?"

He had softened the tone of annoyance in which he first spoke, for Ralph had really contrived to assume a hurt and grievous air, heightened by a little real anger.

"Come, Oswald," he said, at last; "this ——. Damn it, sir, I won't say what it is! But, at least, don't talk as though I wanted to thrust myself into your affairs, or to kidnap you away to my place, which is, I flatter myself, more comfortable than this infernal hole. What concern can it be of mine whether you believe in Waine or not? I have known him more years than you are old ——; but there, never mind, you have reminded me that I am intruding, and I will only leave you my address, in case I can be of any service, as I think I could."

Oswald was a little ashamed of his sudden ebullition of temper.

"No, no," he said; "stay here and have supper with me, and then, if you will let me stay here to-night, I will call on you in the morning. I must send off a messenger for Harry Beamish, if he is in town, and then both of you together may help me; but to-night I can do nothing, as you say."

"No, nor to-morrow either, my dear boy, unless you know how to go about it. Now, look here! I know where to find a fellow that will learn all about it in half the time you could, and will forage them out if they're in London, I'll be bound. He's been an officer, an assistant to one of the Bow-street runners; not one of your new-fashioned gend'arme sort of fellows that the rascally Radicals must be bringing in; but one of the good old sort, who could put the police, or whatever they are called, up to a thing or two. He's set up for himself now, to conduct matters of this sort, and I know I can rely on him. I'll bring him round with me in the morning, Oswald, and you can go out with him, if you please; but be sure you'll save time by having his services."

There was something hopeful in this plan, and poor, proud, simple, selfish Oswald was ready to adopt it at once.

"Never mind, never mind, my dear fellow," said Ralph, shaking hands across the table. "You will learn to trust me when you know me better. Egad! I've had a bad life of it in many ways, and have had no part or lot in the family; but I'm a Fairhoe, for all that, my boy. I'll come over here from my place—it's close by, in Regent-street, you know—the very first thing after breakfast, and bring Filmey with me. By-the-by, Oswald, you'll dine with me to-morrow, of course? six o'clock, you know; and I shall be here to fetch you. You can sleep here and breakfast here, if you like, you know. I'll see that they make you comfortable; but I must have you make my place your home. It's not exactly bachelor's quarters, either; for there's poor little Amina home in London with me, now. She left school, you know, six months ago; and she's all I've got left, you know, Oswald. I must have her near me now."

"Amina!" said Oswald, with an astonished look.

"Yes, my daughter, your cousin Amina," replied his uncle, watching him narrowly through a wreath of cigar-smoke. "Egad! what am I talking about? You've perhaps hardly ever heard of the little chit. At least, you know that I have been married, and that I have been a widower these ten years. Nobody can say that I have ever pushed my private interests where they were not wanted, and we lived abroad, my wife and I. Poor little Amina was born out of England, Oswald, and has lived away from me mostly. You must have heard of her from your mother, surely? If my brother, your father, had lived, you would have known more of us; but ——"

"I've heard that you have been married, uncle," said Oswald, a little confused, and giving Ralph this title of relationship with a kind of jerk, as though he made a concession in return for having unwittingly wounded his feelings; "and, of course, I must have heard something of your—of my cousin; but, upon my word, I hope you'll forgive me for saying that I had forgotten that I was so happy as to possess one." He bowed as he spoke with a kind of grave politeness that was very becoming, and even Ralph was influenced by it; for he suppressed a very ugly smile, and sat looking quite curiously at his kinsman as a sportsman might look at a bird on a tree, with a kind of pitying desire to bring him down with as little pain as possible.

"Amina," said Oswald, rather dreamily. "Dear me, what a pretty name! I hope, sir, that when this unfortunate business is settled you will be able to bring her to Fairhoe."

"Well, I hope so. You see she has at present seen so little of the world, only one or two of my own friends to a quiet supper for an hour or two in the evening. It's very hard upon her that she has no mother, and that I—I—well, never mind, you've troubles enough of your own, Oswald, and you shan't be worried with mine. As you say, when this unhappy affair is settled—but I've enough confidence in you, my boy, to invite you to come and see me now, even before this is off your hands, and then, if my sister-in-law chooses to invite us, we can all go back together."

"I fear not. I fear that—that Barbara will not go back except with me alone, or with her father and me, afterwards, in two or three days, or a week perhaps, if you would bring my cousin ——"

Oswald stopped and turned crimson with confusion, angry with himself at having been betrayed into speaking. "I see you can't understand what I mean," he added hastily, waving his hand and rising from the table.

"My good fellow, no. Egad! of course, I see you spoke without reflection. Such a meeting as you mention couldn't, of course, under the circumstances; but there, there—good night, good night!—I'll see you in the morning. Don't sit up late, now; get a good night's rest."

"One word," said Oswald, stopping him at the door; "you will not mention a word to your daughter of what brings me to town?"

"My dear fellow, what a question! How could I possibly—you forget. Come, go to bed now; off with you."

"Of course. I fear I must be half mad, indeed; she's quite a child, didn't you say—a little girl?"

"Well, no; not exactly a child: but she's a mere infant as far as any knowledge of the world goes, of course, a young creature of that age. But, there, you'll dine with us to-morrow, and I'll be here quite early with Filmey."

"I'll go home and think it over," he continued to himself, as he turned towards his chambers in a quiet street leading to Regent-street. "If he doesn't find this girl, and Filmey will take care of that, a marriage would—well, ah! if she would only play the cards as I'd tell her—a little devil; but I'm afraid there's too much of her mother in her. Tell Mademoiselle that I am home, and that I want to see her," he said to a French maid, as he went up stairs, after the door had been opened in answer to his peal upon the bell.

Oswald sat up for an hour or two in his lonely bedroom at the hotel; for an easy-chair had been placed for him before a bright, cheerful fire, and he sat and mused, neither asleep nor awake; but when, at last, he turned languidly into bed it was with a sense, if not of real comfort, at least of deadened pain.

It may be necessary, in order to account for the introduction of Amina Fairhoe, to go back to the date when her father parted from his brother Blundell.

There is no need to follow Ralph's fortunes during all that time that elapsed from the death of his father. They were at such a low ebb that it was only by the sale of the few remaining trinkets in his possession, and by one or two lucky hits at bagatelle (he had actually got to bagatelle, he who had played billiard-matches at the Cocoa-Tree!), that he gathered sufficient capital to carry him to Calais, where a pretty good number of true Britons were disporting themselves on the bare, blank heights, and at the sloppy beach.

At that time half the world was travelling abroad, and with the world, that disreputable selvage of society consisting of men who, having been ruined by the war or by unsuccessful speculations therein, had gathered up the crumbs of their resources and fled from their debts and their creditors; or of those still more suspicious characters who, by having long preyed upon the foolish and credulous, felt some hope of returning prosperity in the fresh field opened to their labours at the foreign gaming-tables, where English restriction and English manners would offer no check to their unbounded ambition.

Amongst the most obscure and the poorest of these was Ralph Fairhoe, who had been long hanging about the lowest and meanest hells round St. James's until even the shadiest of gamesters were shy of him; for, even in that little world—the world of sharpers and scoundrels—the ordinary assessment prevails; and the rogue who can wear a superfine suit and dazzle the eyes of his company with a diamond ring and a pair of jewelled sleeve-links as he throws the dice or deals the cards is more sure of success than he who slinks about conscious of a threadbare garment and linen of the day before yesterday.

He worked his way somehow; and in truth there were not wanting plenty of his fraternity who, being flush of money, perhaps helped him on a little, or employed him in one of those numerous services which are so useful to rogues in their line of business: when a booty is to be quickly secured, and the pigeon must be plucked rapidly while he is on the wing. By such means he continued to visit several of the second and third-rate watering-places (the first-rate were beyond his capabilities of credit and appearance); and at length landed, with a pretty little stock of money, at Schloppenbad, one of those wonderful German dukedoms, where the Government, the Court, the Ministry, the Army, and the Civil Executive—consisting of about five-and-thirty persons in all—were almost entirely supported by the profits from licensing the *saal*, or play-rooms. The board of green cloth furnished the Grand Ducal table very sumptuously every day; and the "hell," situated in what guide-books called a terrestrial paradise, was the means of his Extraordinary Highness keeping a gay little company together for the best part of the year—to drink the waters, to ride through the charming woods, to picnic in the lovely valleys, or to make excursions to the venerable hermitage in the hills; all of which delightful recreations were within a mere stone's throw of the grand alley of that garden in which everybody met twice a day to hear the band play, and where stood the long, classical-fronted, colonnaded white bath-house, the principal room in which, muffled in velvet-pile carpets, softly lighted, gilded and sparkling with a gorgeous plated buffet, was devoted to the fascinations of *trente et quarante* and *roulette.*

In this room during the second evening of his visit (and luck had seemed to come back to him at Schloppenbad where he was quite unknown, as though fortune had mistaken him for a mere tyro, and so had favoured him in the way which she proverbially takes towards neophytes at the gaming-table) he was strolling from the sideboard, where he had helped himself to a bumper of rather wiry Moselle, when his attention was directed to a lady who sat at one end of the tables deeply occupied over the card and pin with which players at the "red and white" prick off their score of the game.

It was no very uncommon event to see ladies present, for although few of the high-born British dames who went to Schloppenbad for the waters would venture to stake a Napoleon or a double florin for the fun of the game, others were less squeamish, and many of the fair foreign visitors sat for a pretty long spell, spoiling their complexions in the glare of the flaring lamps above and in the heated atmosphere of the room. There happened to be no other lady there on that occasion, however, for it was a Grand Ducal birthday, a wedding-day, or anniversary of some sort, and there was a Court reception and a grand ball, and a Royal performance at the little rickety plaster-of-paris theatre in the Alten Strasse, and the Saal was almost deserted till the late comers should drop in, tired, from their simpler amusements. On these occasions more license was often permitted to visitors, and the ladies frequently appeared abroad in masks, so that identification was difficult, and to see a number of unknown fair ones moving hither and thither, or even sitting at the table in the gaming-room itself, was not unusual.

The lady who had attracted Ralph's attention had her face concealed in this way; and, though a pair of bright eyes shone through the holes in her black silk vizard, none of her features could be distinguished except a pretty rounded chin; but her arms, though lean, were well formed and white; her fingers, on which two or three showy rings glittered, were tapered; and her hair, of a rich brown colour, fell upon spotless and well-rounded shoulders, which came a little too far out of a rather faded dress of amber satin.

She was impatiently thrumming the pin which was stuck through her card as he looked at her, and her shoulders heaved still further out of her dress with the sigh that she gave as the croupier gathered in her stake along with some larger amounts which had been lost.

Turning half round, and catching sight of Ralph as he approached, she beckoned him to her side. "Will you do me a great favour?" she asked, in a slightly foreign accent. "You, I know, are lucky. Consent, then, to play this for me," and she placed a gold piece in his hand. He staked it and won. His luck had not deserted him, and he won again.

"Now go on for yourself," she said excitedly; "you can afford higher stakes, and I will look on. Play away," she added, in remarkably idiomatic English; don't let the grass grow when you may reap such a golden harvest!"

He was a little surprised, but followed her advice, taking up stake after stake, but venturing with a prudence which he had learned by the long desertion which had taught him to mistrust fortune.

After a series of successes he lost once, and recovered his stake again at the next venture. "Now let me go on," said his companion, whose sparkling eager eyes had followed every move, and seemed to glitter as the money chinked over to their side of the table. She staked, and doubled, and won, and won again, with a success that seemed equal to his own. A sort of tacit understanding of partnership grew up between them, and they played thus in turn, till the croupiers began to look glum, and quite a little crowd of people stood round to watch the game. When at length the lady rose from the table, and Ralph, with unaccustomed gallantry, offered her his arm, the bank was a pretty heavy loser.

Repairing to the buffet at his invitation, she removed her mask, and gave him the full benefit of those eyes which now, that they were unshaded, lighted up a face the features of which, though somewhat worn and pale, retained more than the traces of a former beauty.

"Our partnership has been successful," she said, "as I knew it would; let us see who has made the most; for we must share, and share alike, if our luck is to last."

There is a sort of honour even among professed gamblers, and Ralph divided the spoil, even to changing a florin. Both their pockets were pretty heavy with the dumpy German money.

They met the next day and the next at the spa, on the hills, in the grand promenade—where not? for everybody met everybody else every day, and all day long, at Schloppenbad, and met again at the Saal at night. Ralph began to believe that she was his fate, and they were attracted to each other by that superstition which essentially belongs to gambling. For it is well known that there is no superstition so enthralling as that of the unbeliever; no fatalism like that of the man who, having done his worst to abolish order, thinks to live by chance.

It was seldom very difficult to learn something of a woman's history at a place like Schloppenbad, with relays of police and passports on every frontier. But, in fact she made very little secret of her former life. She told him almost all the truth; and which of us, my dear reader, could say as much if we were suddenly called upon to recount our own virtuous career, even to the friend of our soul?

Starting from the very humblest rank in life, she had become a favourite actress at a very minor theatre, whence the fame, either of her melodramatic power or her personal attractions, had, through some channel or other, reached an eminent personage, distinguished no less for his exalted station and the dignity of his manners than for the profligacy of his private life.

Transported suddenly from the trappings of the stage and the glare of the footlights, she had moved for a time a recognised leader in that still falser society whose real existence is known to, but unacknowledged by, the world of respectability and fashion.

She, and a score of women like her, who formed the demi-monde of that day, held high court of their own, and gathered round them those who were not so much their admirers as the votaries of the wild and feverish license, forbidden in more decorous company.

Her decadence was, of course, rapid enough; but she dreaded to return to her old pursuits. Her former experience of the struggles and bitterness of poverty and the chances against success were too vividly remembered to leave her enough strength of will to dare them.

What need is there to follow her through all the chances and changes of the life that led her from one fashionable haunt to another, till she arrived there, at Schloppenbad? That life took a new turn then, and when she and Ralph Fairhoe left the place they went away in company. They were married soon afterwards—less, perhaps, from any sense of propriety than from the working of that strange superstition already alluded to. If they were once divided, why should not fortune fail? Strangely enough—and yet such an apparent confirmation of a superstition often happens—that luck went on; and Ralph Fairhoe became, comparatively, quite a virtuous character. Indeed, who shall say where virtue begins and ends? He lived a moderately-regular life; and we all of us find it easy enough to confound mere regularity with virtue. To rise at eight, to eat four meals a day punctually, to pay one's bills at periodical convenience, to go to church twice on Sunday—what is this but virtue, as the world goes? And yet it may all originate in impenetrable selfishness. It is true that virtue can scarcely consist with disorder; but mere regularity may be but the rivet to fasten us to vice. "Jim's very reg'lar in his habits," said an omnibus-conductor, addressing your humble servant, the other day; "he gets drunk ev'ry night."

So Ralph Fairhoe prospered, if any man can be said to prosper in so miserable a sense; and a daughter was born. This child was in some sort an incumbrance in the life that he and his wife led, and she knew little of a mother's care. She was put out to nurse, and with various intervals of travelling from place to place, and finding a home only in the lodgings occupied by her father in foreign cities or in London, was placed at a school in France, or left in the care of the mistress of a pension or boarding-house, where she picked up some sort of education, and learned a great deal more of the world; (by which is, of course, meant of the meanness, cruelty, and falsehood of the world) than was good for her at her age. Such home-training as she had was scarcely more favourable, and the flashy company meeting at the paternal board, or during those quiet evenings at home, when picquet or écarté were the amusements and play ran high, was of the worst kind; mostly men though, for her mother had maternal yearning instincts, and shielded her as well as might be from some kinds of evil. Ralph, too, would never let her be subject to the coarse jokes or ambiguous speeches of his comrades; for, to do him justice, he recognised the value of her youth and freshness, and would not have it needlessly damaged.

Perhaps he looked forward to the time when she might take a better place in the world; but such morality as his is neither very profound nor very durable; and as she grew into a girl, with the heritage of her mother's beauty and no small share of her mother's quick powers of acquiring superficial accomplishments, he began to regard her as a probably useful auxiliary in his nefarious business—an additional attraction for a higher class of dupes, or customers, and yet a respectable attraction—one which it was his duty in a distorted and unhealthy way, to watch and protect as a piece of valuable property. He felt this all the more keenly when his wife died, and was buried in a foreign cemetery; and in all the grief of that bitter time—for he had really been as kind as it was in his nature to be, evil and unscrupulous as he was—he found some solace in thinking that he had a daughter who could supply her place. This is how she had come to live in London, where he had now settled as permanently as he could settle anywhere; and she now ruled his strange household with a sort of half capricious, half subservient, temper, guided by a father for whom she yet felt both love and repugnance.

The house in which Ralph Fairhoe lived was a singularly composite building, or rather the ornamentation of the front offered as remarkable a contrast as did the furniture and appointments of the interior. Lying just off the main thoroughfare of Regent-street, which was at that time believed to be the very latest triumph of London architecture, and occupying a corner in a rather dingy and quiet turning, it was distinguished from the houses on either side by two peculiarities—by a side entrance to the ground floor, which consisted of a pair of dingy offices, very scantily provided with a bare, old writing-table, a couple of cane-bottomed chairs, a square of oilcloth, a dilapidated deal desk, and a brass fender; and by a verandah to the upper windows, covered with flowering shrubs and plants, and shaded in sunny weather by a green-striped awning.

The lower windows were fitted with old canvas blinds on which the word Office had been painted in black letters; and at the dilapidated desk a shabby, blear-eyed, furtive-looking man sat amusing himself with a three-days' old newspaper, or in eating something with great secresy out of a paper bag under the lid of the desk itself. There was little need for such caution; for he was alone from ten till four, which were the business hours, according to an inscription also written on the dingy blind; but it was his duty to cultivate a secret and confidential manner; for he was clerk to Bankes and Co., whose name figured on the door-post beneath a brass bell-handle, and Bankes and Co. discounted bills at anything above 15 per cent. Some knowing discountees said that Bankes and Co. was Ralph Fairhoe; and, indeed, it is very likely that this was so, and that the money advanced below was frequently paid or lost above.

This upper portion of the house was furnished in a style which was a little too florid to be elegant, but, at the same time, displayed a vast amount of glittering ornament that looked uncommonly bright and splendid by candle-light. The drawing-room was quite in the French taste—gilding, and marble, mirrors, auriferous cupids little porcelain miniatures, semi-classical statuettes, florid carving, and pinked cornices, making up, with showy pile velvet and an arrangement of soft lamplight, and a good selection of upholstery, for any more substantial furniture. The little dining-room, exactly arranged for a party of not more than eight, and still more conveniently for six, was less ostentatious; but those favoured few who had tested the resources of the establishment had declared that the owner knew where to send for an elegant little repast, and had some excellent wine somewhere on the premises. These things—the dinners and the wine—were part of Ralph's capital, and were used mostly on state occasions, when the ultimate proceedings at the little green tables in the next room paid the expenses even of fresh phalanxes of hock and sauterne.

To this retreat several choice spirits resorted, old or new acquaintances of the master of the house—some of them his accomplices, others in the capacity of retainers or jackals, and others again, to whom he himself acted as aide-de-camp, giving them the use of his rooms for plucking some particular bird of their own starting, for the fee of a reversion of the remaining feathers after they had done with him.

Thus there were one or two noble lords and gentlemen of great rank and fashion, whose position in good society might have been compromised by any suspicion of proprietorship in a regular "hell," but who found it convenient to have a resort where they might have the game in their own hands—of course, without the slightest suspicion of cheating; and there were the recognised "sporting characters" on whom calumny had not yet fastened, but who would sit out the sun, after he had gone down in the west at one window of Ralph Fairhoe's lodgings, and still sit till he came blinking up again at the east window, and never leave their man till he was stripped and ruined, unless he had what they emphatically called the devil's luck. And there were those again—skulking below mostly, or only showing themselves when "the bucks" were absent—who had punted and cogged and loaded, and carried kings in their hats, and false dice in their sleeves, all over Europe, or had been whipped off race-courses and kicked down club steps—the lowest followers of this disreputable army—fellows who would not have scrupled to steal linen off a hedge, but that they had lost the courage for anything so straightforward as a simple theft.

With these Amina Fairhoe, the vivacious, dark-haired, keen-eyed, supple, and graceful daughter of the principal had nothing to do. She was a prime ally of her father, and knew more than was good for her of all that went on there—even when the play was kept up all night, and hock and broiled bones were succeeded by cold brandy and seltzer, after she had vanished up stairs to her own boudoir. She presided at those choice little dinners, received the compliments of Lord Ajax and the Honourable Achilles with a bright laugh or a look of petrified indifference, according to her father's instructions. Just as the birdcatcher places a bright and beautiful feathered creature near his net to dazzle the eyes of the poor wavering fools upon the trees, she was placed in that gilded saloon to heighten the attraction of the ring of the coin, and give a domestic turn to the pretty pastime that went on there.

She went out sometimes, but seldom with anybody but her father, for she had no society with women. Sometimes in the park, as she went past in a neat open carriage which Ralph hired, or trotted along on a steady hack from the livery stables, the female relations of Ajax or Achilles would wonder who that girl could be, that rather bold-looking but distingué stranger, to whom the gentlemen made rapid bows of recognition, and once or twice leading questions were put to discover whether she was in society, but no satisfactory answer came of it. They began to fear in spite of protestations to the contrary, that she was an eccentric but quietly conducted member of that world (that *demi-monde*) to which allusion has already been made.

To this lonely, dazzling, melancholy conspirator, then, Oswald was introduced on the following evening, after he had rested and dressed, and almost declined to accompany his uncle, who had waited patiently for him for nearly an hour. He had been about all day with Filmey, who came punctually with Ralph in the morning, and to whom (his old schoolfellow, Harry Beamish not being in town) he had committed the task of making inquiries.

There is little need to describe Filmey here. He had been the private intelligencer of a Bow-street runner of great fame in the days when Bow-street runners were famous; and, beside being a thin, shabby, watery-eyed man, who seemed to walk always in his own shadow, he was silent and unobtrusive—was a person of immovable inanity of countenance and great reticence of speech; never, indeed, uttering a syllable which could be as well interpreted by a jerk, or a beck, or a simper, or a shrug, or a phantom kick, or the motion of an elbow. A neutral-tint man, with not a symptom of the dread secrets to be by him discovered at keyholes, dead walls, lath and plaster partitions, staircase landings, and area steps. "Private inquiry offices," established by superannuated incapables or disgraced police officers, were not then in fashion—under that name at least—and no advertisements of any such institution appeared in the daily papers, or Filmey would have made money. As it was, he was often useful in fishing out information for Ralph Fairhoe, and the latter worthy found no difficulty in consigning Oswald to his care, with the understanding that nothing should be discovered of Silas Waine, or his daughter, until they were well away from England.

If any man could scent a clue, Filmey could; and he could do more than that—draw another man off the game as cleverly as the most experienced huntsman could cross a scent with a toasted red herring.

When Oswald saw his cousin—notwithstanding the deep despondency and grief which lay at his heart and added to the weakness of his recent illness—he was both surprised and interested. With a complexion dark but delicate, of which the ripe bloom (who shall say whether, even at her early age, it was due to nature or to art?) as well as the deep lustre of her eyes, was set off by a pale green robe trimmed with delicate lace; with firm but mobile lips slightly parted over brilliant teeth, and the rich hue of her hair showing lustrous under the semi-opaque shaded lamps that hung from the ceiling, which, while they threw much of the room into shadow, lighted her as the central figure amidst dim gleams of glass and gold,—she seemed to him something almost unreal. It was the unreality of stage effect, perhaps, but he had no time to analyse; he could only look, and pause, and bow, and at last, as her father introduced him, yield to the gentle pressure of her hand, and to the ingenuous simplicity with which she drew him to an easy seat near the fire. Then the lamps were turned up, and he became familiar with the vision that had so surprised him; had time to examine her face and figure more closely as he answered her few questions about Fairhoe and the old house, and his mother, and his school days—artless questions of which a more knowing man would have seen the art. Then dinner was ready, and he was introduced to a guest to whom he felt a repugnance which surely was not jealousy, but which it would have been difficult to explain by any other name. The visitor, however, was but a tall, pale, regular featured, languid, depressed gentleman—a Mr. Philip Ravel, and a barrister of some eminence, so his cousin told him, who, when he was not silently sipping his wine, or cracking nuts, or attending to the duties of the table with a graceful negligence that was almost akin to self-contempt, spoke to Ralph on ordinary topics, and seldom addressed the lady except with ceremonious politeness. It would have been quite a family party, but for this unassuming guest, who, however, so little disturbed the occasion that, except for a bright, keen, inquiring glance that shot from beneath his eyelids now and then, he might have been altogether indifferent to anybody present.

When Amina played and Oswald stood at the piano listening, he sat smoking in an easy-chair by the drawing-room fire; for smoking was permitted, and Amina herself acknowledged to an occasional cigarette. When, still later in the evening, the cousins sat down that Oswald might learn the mysteries of some game at cards which his charming cousin had volunteered to teach him, Ralph looking slily on, like an amiable vulture or a benevolent raven, the silent guest still sat, and smoked, and mused; but even while he rose to get his hat and to say good-night he noticed that the girl's face had deepened to a thoughtful expression, and that, as she looked at the cards in her hand, she was revolving some other subject in her mind. Ralph remarked it, too, and though he left them together, to see his guest to the door, he was back quickly. When Oswald left for the night Amina had quite an anxious look, and her father heard her little foot beating impatiently on the floor, as he went up the stairs, after fastening the street-door; for the servants had gone to bed, and it was long past midnight.

"Look here, father," she said, impatiently. "You may have your plans, but I have mine. You want to win his money; but I don't know whether I don't want to win him and his money too. I might do worse; and I think he's likeable, and even loveable."

"What do you mean, girl?" said Ralph, astonished at this sudden turn, although he had had some experience of his daughter's strong will and capricious temper in smaller matters. "Do you forget what has brought him to London? For shame, Amina! You'd never stake yourself for what another woman has won? Beside, you marry, at your age—absurd! No, no. 'Twouldn't do. You don't know my sister-in-law, Blundell's wife, as I do."

"Pshaw!" retorted the girl, gathering back her hair, which had fallen in a rich mass upon her neck, and putting her dainty feet upon the fender. "You surely don't talk to me of staking myself, when you have set me here to stake myself every day? My beauty, if I have any; my abilities, such as they are; my craft, my cunning, my every look and word, are a part of the game that we play for such paltry stakes; and surely I may put them on a higher venture. What if he has come to London to look after another woman who is too great a fool to dare the anger and the pride of his lady mother? I'm of his own blood, and yet have more fire in me than all the Fairhoes and all the Bullpoints—isn't that the other family name?—it's a beauty—more blood, I say, than all of them put together. No, I haven't fire, but I've steel; and if I meet a flint I strike fire, and so much the worse for the flint, for it will break sooner than I shall. Let me meet Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe as her son's affianced wife, and the old house will soon know its mistress. You say he'll never find this girl again, or that, if he does, she can never be his wife; that her own father would kill her first. Well, I've a father of a different sort; and let me tell you, dear, that I mean to lead my cousin captive, and then we shall have what I have heard that you have longed for many a day before this boy was born."

"Amina, you are excited, my girl; you talk like a woman of the world, not like a girl of seventeen or so."

"Seventeen!—I'm seventy in craft. Oh, how I wish I wasn't, and that I could forget all that I have learnt in the bad business that you have put me to! What has been the home that I have known but such as this, or the bare, dreary round of a foreign boarding-house, or a school where I was the only one who wasn't a hypocrite because I gloried in my powers of mischief? A woman of the world, indeed,—I am old enough to be a woman; and what is there bad in the world that I haven't known and seen ever since I was a child?" Here she burst into a passion of tears and again beat her foot upon the floor. Ralph had seen her in such a mood more than once before, and it always troubled him a little.

"Well, well, we shall see; wait, at least, until we learn what has become of this girl," he said, "Oswald will be here every night, I can see that plainly, and he shan't play high, I pledge my honour he shan't. I won't have any of the set here, or if I do he shall be left out of it. Upon my soul he shall." After which assurance his daughter kissed him and went up to bed, leaving him plunged in deep thought, out of which he saw no present issue in action.

Day after day passed, and Oswald could glean no news of Silas Waine or of his daughter, or rather Filmey would give him no intelligence. The dead weight that lay on his spirits was hardly lifted; but he felt its pressure less. If anybody had dared to say that he was forgetting Barbara, or that he lived with any other hope than that she would one day return and be the pride of his life, he would have been violently angry; but the hope and the expectation was less strong, and the first great sorrow at having lost her had been veiled, even though that veil might be easily removed.

There was an influence between him and his cousin about which he scarcely inquired of himself, but which was very real, and had in it something of the sweetness of a pleasant opiate. Her kindness, her half-expressed sympathy for a grief of which she was, as he believed, only partly informed, and even her strange temperament of mingled *naïveté* and worldliness had a charm for him. Her society was, if we may so express it, an anodyne; and he was fascinated by the drug that dulled pain and intoxicated him with a strange excitement.

In less than a week he was her companion in her drives; nay, the Fairhoe carriage which had not been sent home, was seen in the park where he rode beside her. At the theatre, the opera, and all sorts of amusements, they appeared together, and Ralph grew more and more thoughtful and even gloomy. Society was coming back to town, and in the drive, one day, the Fairhoe carriage, with its pair of occupants, was noted by a stately gentleman on horseback; no other, indeed, than our friend Vivian Bullpoint, who thereupon wrote to his sister some artfully expressed inquiries respecting his nephew's acquaintances in London.

Before this letter had produced its effect, however, there came a crisis which might have put an end to Oswald, and so have given Ralph Fairhoe his wish without his daughter's marriage. It happened that the young gentleman was in the coffee-room of a hotel, where he had just learned from Filmey that intelligence had been gained of the fugitives, and that they had embarked many days ago for Australia. He had dismissed his agent for the time, angry and fretful with himself, and, wondering what it was his duty to do (it is a very bad sign for duty when we wonder about it), had gone to the window, muttering to himself, and beating a tattoo on the glass with his fingers. At that moment a bustling, swaggering, over-dressed, reddish-faced, inflammatory gentleman entered the room, and, after cursing the weather, and cursing his boots, and finally cursing himself, strode up to Oswald, and slapped him familiarly on the shoulder.

"Ah! ha! my knight of the rueful countenance, you here?" he said, with fine jocularity. "What, has that charming little creature thrown you over? Never say die, man! I quite expected it. The fair

Amina has got some of her mother's blood in her; and between you and me—um! ha!"

He stopped at the look that came over Oswald's face; for the young man had turned round upon him and, with a heightened colour, had recognised one of the rank and file of that army whose representatives haunted his uncle's chamber.

"Do you know of whom and to whom you are speaking, Mr.—Mr.—upon my word, I have forgotten your name?" he said, clenching his hands.

"Oh, oh, if you come to that, and your name's Oswald, and that's the only name I've ever heard you called by (as indeed it was), I'm Mr. Flasher Skidd, at your service; but mind you, I'm not to be bullied. I should think I ought to know Ralph Fairhoe and his girl by this time; and I say again that she's——why, look here, man, do you know who her mother was?"

Oswald was excited and out of temper; worst of all he was dissatisfied with himself, and this sudden insult to the one person who was a little too prominent in his thoughts settled him. Mr. Skidd received a smart blow in the face, and Oswald, almost before he knew it was offered, fancied that he had accepted a challenge for the following morning. If he'd had any doubt about it, that doubt would have been dispelled by the sudden entrance of Mr. Philip Ravel, that eminent barrister and depressed gentleman, whose indifference on the first evening that Oswald visited his uncle had been tempered by the quick, searching glance with which he regarded the cousins.

"You'll excuse me for saying so, I trust," he said;

"but I'm afraid you've done a very foolish thing, Mr. Oswald Fairhoe, unless that man Skidd is a liar, and that's probable. You know you can't fight him."

"Why not? I don't see that I can't, though he's a blackguard, I dare say," said Oswald; "but I haven't a friend in London that I can send for. Will you act for me in this?" he said, grasping Mr. Ravel's hand.

The barrister started back a little; but presently a queer, keen, bright look shone in his face. "Yes," he said, "I will; but you must leave yourself entirely in my hands."

Oswald was only too happy to do so; and this was what came of it. On the next morning but one, four gentlemen met at daylight, or rather when the first grey rim of dawn was creeping over the flat waste of Battersea fields; the seconds, of whom Mr. Philip Ravel was one, had placed their men, and had retired to give the deadly signal, when two determined-looking characters in velveteen, who had been waiting by a coach, (in which a young lady sat, muffled to her eyes,) rushed upon the scene, and, after a short but desperate struggle, bore away Mr. Flasher Skidd to the residence of their principal and employer, Mr. Moss of Cursitor-street, whence he was finally conveyed to that prison, known as his Majesty's Bench.

CHAPTER XV.

COMPANY AT THE HALL.

THERE was nothing romantic in the occurrence that interrupted the duel between Oswald and his antagonist; but Amina was more than usually tender, and spoke to him in a voice unconsciously subdued, and regarded him with a strange, soft light in her big dark eyes. Had he not fought for her, and been willing to risk even his life in defence of her fame? She had only heard a few hurried particulars from her father, to whom Ravel had applied at once that the duel might be prevented; and her entreaties that the bailiffs should immediately be set loose upon Mr. Skidd were followed by a determination that she herself would accompany them, in order to prevent accidents. Ralph submitted to both propositions with an ill grace, and, indeed, seemed so difficult to move in the matter that even Ravel, who knew his man pretty well, was quite taken aback.

"Confound it, man!" said that gentleman, with unusual earnestness, "you can't let your nephew fight about your daughter with a fellow like Skidd, though it may be very inconvenient to dispense with his valuable services and to sell him up—unless ——" and here Mr. Ravel called up a cross-examining look and whistled softly to himself—"unless you prefer getting rid of the young gentleman; in which case I shall take care to have a couple of police officers on the ground, and we'll make a criminal case of it."

Ralph found his daughter less reasonable still, and she roundly accused him of wanting to be rid of Oswald by means of Skidd's bullet. "Curse him!" said the amiable uncle, "I wish he'd died long ago, for that matter; but why should you talk to me like this? I never brought the quarrel upon him; and if he hadn't been a fool, he'd have flung Flasher's card back into his face. Why should your name be dragged into a brawl, I'd like to know? Egad, I've a good mind to leave them to fight it out."

"Well, do so, then," said the girl, her eyes flashing fire and her face going from red to white, as she stamped upon the velvet-pile carpet and clenched her little hands till the rings cut her white, taper fingers. "Do so, and I will be on the ground myself. My name, indeed! who has ever respected it? or who that comes here would have defended me from the lying slander of your friends and followers? I swear before Heaven that if this duel takes place and Oswald is killed, I will take that other man's life in exchange; and if you don't stop them you shall never see me more, if I beg my bread through the town."

Never had Ralph seen such a look in her face, where rage, pity, love, and gratitude seemed to be struggling for the mastery; and who shall tell how that ill-disciplined, misdirected, wayward, hardened, artful little soul had melted under the thought of the cousin who had stood her champion, and defended her against insult, which was perhaps the more bitter that it was not ill-founded? For a time, at least, her whole heart, or so much of it as had not been seared and corrupted by the life that she had led, went out towards her brave relative. She would have taken him in her arms and kissed him for greeting, but that she knew instinctively the time had not yet come when he regarded her as tenderly as he yet held the memory of another love. She could have wept and hung upon his shoulder, but that she had learned to laugh at emotion and to keep her face under perfect control. For an hour after his arrival on that evening she suffered a tempest of sentiment such as she had never before experienced, and it softened and subdued her, though she kept silence and nerved herself for the morrow. Oswald left early, and she nearly broke down at parting, though Ralph was looking on with a sardonic sneer, knowing that judgment was out against Skidd, and that she had arranged to have a coach ready long before daylight. But the young man, who had, of course, heard nothing of all this, and who was too ashamed of the reason for his quarrel to mention a word of it to those most interested, was unconsciously tender and gracious in what he felt might be a last adieu. It was in some sort a poetic situation, and but that it was spoiled by the suspicion that his uncle's character and habits gave some ground for Skidd's imputations, he would have been quite heroic in a sentimental way. As it was, he lingered and looked with unutterable melancholy as he said "Good-by" instead of "Good-night," to Amina, and, fostering an impulse not altogether unnatural in return for the soft pressure of her hand, stooped and kissed her cheek, and then went home to write a letter to Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, saying little of the cause of his quarrel, but making a full confession of his love for Barbara Waine and all its sad consequences, entreating his mother to recall her, and, as she valued her son's dying prayer and last hope, to cherish and protect her for his sake. It is scarcely strange that, after he had written this letter and enclosed it in an envelope to Philip Ravel, to be delivered in case he should fall by Flasher Skidd's pistol, he felt singularly calm for a time. He even came to think that this might be the best ending of it all; that his death would set Barbara free, and perhaps remove Mrs. Fairhoe's animosity towards her. What had he to live for, with his heart dead to all that made life worth having?

In the background of these thoughts was the figure of his bereaved mother—but had she not said that she would rather see him dead than married to her whom he had come to London to seek? Would that he could spare her the pain that this terrible fulfilment of her threat might yield her. His bright, strange, pretty cousin, too! How long would she grieve for him when she came to know what had led to his premature death? Should he write to her? No; what need? He would send her a last message by Philip Ravel, entreating her, if ever she should meet Barbara, to be kind to her for his sake; or, better still, he would say nothing any way, but keep his thoughts dutifully for her who had loved him so well and so foolishly. These were the thoughts that kept the poor young fellow awake that night—these and other awful reflections, which grew upon him as he lay there, waiting for the time when Ravel should call in the hackney coach—thoughts which it would be unseemly to record here—vague, and wandering, and speculative, some of them, but not without a certain fear and reverence. After these he came to the determination not to kill his adversary, but to fire in the air. He would at least die without the stain of wilful murder on his soul; and might he be forgiven!

It may easily be believed, then, that the feeling of the young man at the termination of the drama was less one of relief than of disappointment. At first, it seemed as though all the anxiety and distress of mind which he had suffered the night before had been wasted, and he smarted under a sense of shame and wrong that he should have been spared the danger of his adversary's bullet, or the glory of his own generous determination, by means so commonplace and vulgar. So keenly did he feel this, that he turned angrily upon his second, whose pale, keen face was lighted by a queer grin as the bailiffs bore away their prisoner, and, in a trembling voice, demanded how he had dared to put such an affront on him—how he could explain away the disgrace, if it had not been of his making?

"Come, come, my good fellow," retorted Ravel, coolly, "don't talk about disgrace, after having so far forgotten yourself as to accept the challenge of that blackleg; those who go into such company and grow intimate have reason to thank any chance that rids them of the penalty. Let us get away as soon as possible to my chambers, and then we can have some breakfast and talk it over. There's a cab in waiting in the road, and you may think better of this affair than to charge me with it as an offence. At all events, you are devilish ready to give me the credit of it. Why shouldn't Skidd himself have given these fellows the office?"

Oswald was looking across the field towards a small clump of scrub, and, as the barrister spoke, pointed to a woman who was walking swiftly beyond it to a spot where a vehicle had drawn up. It was too far off for him to see her face; but, as she entered the vehicle, she gave one eager look towards them and then shrunk back and was driven swiftly away. There was no mistaking that figure, and the very features seemed for a moment to be visible, so characteristic was the sudden gesture with which she turned her head.

It was Amina, then, who had come to this ignoble rescue, and he felt the humiliation all the more deeply. He had no longer any mission in London, Filmey's last intelligence had put an end to his hopes in that respect. He would return at once to Fairhoe, and there take some means for bringing Barbara back to England, even though he should sell another field to send a messenger, or go himself to seek her. Silently and moodily enough he followed Philip Ravel to the coach, which was in waiting not far from the spot where the Red House formerly stood, and in company with the surgeon, from whom they parted at the outskirts of Westminster, made the dreary journey back to town.

Mr. Philip Ravel's chambers consisted of two rooms, in one of those narrow passages whose intricate mazes mislead the unaccustomed visitor to the Temple. A dusty, dingy, flagstoned no-thoroughfare, with its windows covered by the dust of the great highway of Fleet-street, and its doorways and ledges encrusted with the accumulated grime and dirt which having been blown thither found no outlet, and so choked the gutters and deepened the colour of the paint to one dead tint. A cool, shady place even in the height of summer, and not without some whiffs of air from the Temple Gardens, from which it was separated but by a row of tall houses opposite, where the wealthier residents in chambers looked towards the river; a draughty place in winter, when the keen air from the great street beyond came whistling round the corner, and moaning at finding itself entrapped in a closed space, rumbled in every chimney. A quiet place always, where a dreamy solitary man might have his will, and sit all day undisturbed, except by the occasional echo of a wandering footstep or the rapid footfall of a busy attorney's clerk, or the cry of some errant printer's devil beating a tattoo on the pavement as he waited for copy—a still, sad place, yet with a sound of distant traffic humming about it like the surging of a far-off sea upon a beach.

This murmur had just begun for the day when Oswald alighted at Temple Bar, and followed his companion to one of the least grimy of the doorways in the court, whence, they reached a dark and devious staircase, on the first landing of which Mr. Ravel opened an outer and then an inner door, and welcomed his visitor with a frank grace which was in very happy contrast with his usual indifference.

There had been some preparations made for their coming, for a cheerful fire burned in the pinched, old-fashioned stove, and a clean breakfast cloth covered a full half of the square writing-table; while coffee, hot rolls, and a couple of covered dishes were set inside the fender. The other half of the table was still in its ordinary state of confusion, it is true, and contained a remarkable collection of books, papers, parchments, snuffboxes, and general gimcracks, all heaped round a great shaded reading-lamp. There was a good deal of disorder in the place; and yet it was amply and comfortably furnished. It is doubtful whether Oswald ever enjoyed a breakfast more thoroughly, in spite of his despondency and the angry mood into which he had fallen. He needed some physical stimulus, and everything here was excellent, from the clear coffee and devilled kidneys to the choice liqueur and biscuits, which formed a supplementary course, and were produced from a bin fitted in the recess of the window.

But there was something more than these merely physical comforts, and by the time they had begun to exert their influence, when the cheerful glow of the fire, the snug chair, the curious hum of the outer world, booming so sleepily in that queer room that had something comfortably picturesque even in its very disorder, had somehow brought a sense of rest and ease, he began to feel that inexpressible fascination which minds like his experience in the society of a man who is at once keen and delicate, knowing and refined, a man of the world, who is not yet altogether spoiled by that world to which he gives only a mock allegiance. There was another charm, too, in Philip Ravel—he was a sad man, with a touch of cynicism which yet had in it more heart and loving-kindness than the stereotyped babble of many a professed philanthropist—a tenderness that came of some sorrow which he was content to bear. It may be only necessary to add, as an indication of his contradictory character, that he had the entrée to "society," and yet alternated between these dull chambers and the questionable company which was to be found at places like Ralph Fairhoe's lodgings; and that, with taste, refinement, and considerable knowledge of his profession, he preferred to practise, when he took a case at all, at one of the Criminal Courts, and had already established a reputation for defence which brought some strange clients to the little dark hutch of an office, once an ante-room, where he kept a boy in attendance on the landing close to his outer door.

It was little to be wondered at that Oswald should be led away from his usual moody reserve to a confidence which was first won by the easy good humour of his new friend and then confirmed by the delicacy with which he touched on the secret grief so obvious in the young man's manner.

"You think too much of this morning's business," he had said, after listening, with a patient smile, to Oswald's complaints of the ignominious ending to the encounter with Mr. Skidd; "no wonder. We are all prone to feel too keenly when we have been suffering from some inward hurt—our sympathies have been laid bare and the reaction is a selfish one. You'll really be glad in a week's time that affairs took such a turn; and, to prove that I think so, I'll deal candidly with you and tell you the real state of the case."

And so he confessed the part that he had played in bringing about the termination of the morning's proceedings.

Oswald was very angry, but it was impossible to resist the gentle frankness which assured him that there could have been no greater degradation than to have his name associated with such an event as a duel with a well-known blackleg and gamester.

"Not for your own sake only, but on account of others who are, perhaps, still more dear to you," added the barrister, meaningly.

"You mean my cousin Amina," said Oswald, looking him full in the face. "Do you know, Mr. Ravel I begin to fear that it might have been no such very great injury to her. I mean that—that——. Pray tell me if I'm wrong in thinking that the poor girl is placed in a very——that my uncle, Ralph Fairhoe, is not the man to have the charge of such a daughter, and that his companions (you know I don't allude to you), the men who go there, and play and drink where there are no ladies, are not the best society for any woman?"

Mr. Ravel looked at him keenly as he spoke; and then, with a half-bitter, half-pitying smile, stirred the fire and lighted a cigar.

Oswald did not smoke, and therefore waited for an answer till the blue rings of vapour began to circle round his companion's head.

"Look here, my dear fellow!" said that gentleman, in the intervals of his puffs; "I scarcely dare speak to you as plainly as I might; but let me very seriously advise you not to visit your respected uncle too often. Play runs high there sometimes, I assure you; and if you are not already intimately acquainted with your relative and don't know what manner of man he is—— Oh! you do? Very well, then; I'm glad of it, because I've been feeling for some days past that it was my duty to warn you. If you really know Ralph Fairhoe then, be sure that his daughter has no secrets from him that he does not guess. She came from her foreign school to a seclusion as complete, or at all events, to an espionage quite as certain; and all she learnt there or elsewhere, her very dress and manner and beauty, and the sparkling waywardness that is not yet worn out of her by the accursed life she leads, are but a part of his stock in trade. Poor girl—poor girl—no life I know of can be more dreary or more degrading! You'll forgive me, I hope, for speaking so freely in answer to your question, but even Flasher

Skidd's coarse brutality had a certain truth in it which no gentleman could have spoken without pain and shame, even in such a confidence as you have permitted between us this morning."

"And yet you think that this morning's business might have made her suffer," said Oswald, shaking his proffered hand.

"It was not of Amina Fairhoe that I was speaking," said Ravel, slowly, and looking with his calm, dark grey eyes into his companion's face. "I thought of your mother, Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe, and of one other lady, whose name I need not mention perhaps, but whose happiness should be dear to you."

"Of whom are you speaking?" said Oswald, turning pale as the blood left his burning face and rushed back upon his heart.

"I am a nephew of Mr. Petifer," replied Ravel, "you will scarcely wonder therefore that I have heard of Miss Barbara Waine."

His face was partly obscured by a veil of tobacco-smoke, or Oswald might have seen how pale he, too, had turned—if, indeed, that deader white which overspread his features could be called paler than their usual bloodless hue.

"Pardon me if I have given you pain," he said, presently; "but she also is entitled to some consideration in such a matter."

Poor, proud, weak, wretched Oswald! The thought of the meanness, cowardice, treachery, which had wrought all the misery to her and to himself came upon him with redoubled force. The clear, calm eye rested on him from the opposite corner of the fireplace. The thin and white but sinewy hand that held the cigar so easily, never stirred; and yet there seemed to be in both hand and eye an invitation to confidence, a promise of sympathy. He broke into a deep sob, almost without being ashamed of it; and the tears stole out from between the fingers of the hand with which he covered his face.

And yet he had not the courage to tell all, only that he had fallen ill, and that Barbara had fled with her father, and that he must have her back again at any price, or he should die, and would rather die than live, and so on, back into the old, selfish, egotistical groove and mock-heroic sentiment again; but not a word about that deserted child, or of the still deeper ruin that had come of his weak and undisciplined love.

Had he seen the spasm of pain and the deepening pallor that came over Philip Ravel's face as he went on he might have been surprised; and once, when he was bemoaning his own want of purpose, the straight eyebrows bent angrily over those dark eyes, and that lean, white hand clenched suddenly; but the feeling passed, and he got some kind of sympathy, as he had expected, though it was not unmingled with contempt.

"Yes; you have been rather too long in leading-strings indeed," remarked the barrister, with a great sigh, and scarcely seeming to know what he said; "but there is only one thing to be done now. Were I in your place, I would ship off to Australia within a month, if I had to take a pick and spade and dig my way to my daily bread. But meanwhile, I would send some trusty messenger to say that I was on my way, and to say it to her alone. Is there nobody who would go for you?"

"Yes; there's Filmey—the man who has been inquiring for me in London—he might go."

"Filmey," said Ravel, astonished; "you don't mean the ex-officer of Bow-street—the private-inquiry man? How the devil did you pick him up? Not from our uncle, I hope? Not from Ralph Fairhoe—I know he's a satellite of his."

"Yes; he brought him to me, and said he was the best man in London for finding out anything."

The barrister looked at Oswald in quite his usual manner, with half-closed lids, from beneath which a clear gleam seemed to shoot inquiringly; a grim smile contracted his thin lips. "Is the Fairhoe land entailed?" he asked.

"Yes, some of it, not all. But why?"

"Oh! nothing; I hope you'll pardon the inquiry; but don't send Filmey. Look here, let me know in a week whether you have found a really trusty messenger, and, if not, I'll come down and see you at Fairhoe. Well, well; I'll come whether or not, if you will have it so. Pardon me again for having so unwarrantably interfered in your affairs. You're off home this afternoon, I think you said, and won't call at Marjory-street to see your fair cousin before you go? I think you're quite right. Good bye! good bye!"

Oswald had wrung his hand, and had gone half way down the staircase, when he heard him calling over the baluster. It was to return the letter which had been left with him, under cover for Mrs. Fairhoe, in the event of her son falling by Mr. Flasher Skidd's hand. "Come up, and put it on the fire," he said; "such letters are dangerous luggage when the necessity for them is over."

"Oh, never mind!" said Oswald; "it's an unpleasant companion; but I'll put it safely here in my pocket-book; it's an inside pocket; and then I can burn it at the hotel." He wanted to enjoy the luxury of reading this letter again, now that the crisis which produced it was past: to dwell on the thoughts and feelings which had stimulated it, and so make it minister to that purposeless self-dissection which was a part of his character.

He thrust it into the pocket-book, in company with a bank note for ten pounds and a few receipts from shopkeepers at Grundon. But he had better have taken Mr. Ravel's advice; for he had sent the carriage home the day before, and, putting his hand into his pocket after the coach had started on its second stage, he missed both pocket-book and letter. Next him on the box-seat had sat a sporting-looking but quiet, unobservant person, who got down at a beershop at the first stage out of London.

Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe had been a little startled at the intelligence of her son's new infatuation; but she was a woman of the world, and therefore fully sensible of the value of such a counteracting influence to the danger which had menaced him in the loss of Barbara.

Her first impulse was to hurry off to London at once and endeavour to avert what might be a new calamity. But reflection came to her aid, and she sat down, instead, to write a coolly kind letter to Ralph, thanking him for his care of her son, intimating that she had heard how his daughter had taken up her abode with him in London, and inviting them both to visit Fairhoe on that day week, to spend a few days before the wintry weather set in. Inclosed was a note for Oswald, asking him to return as soon as possible, to help her to prepare for the entertainment of her guests; hoping that he had recovered from his weakness; and concluding with a few loving words, which, however, contained no allusion to the cause of his anxiety. As these letters only arrived in London on the very morning of the duel, Oswald reached home a little before he was expected, and found great preparations going on in every part of the house. New hangings and carpets had replaced the old, and the old had been renovated to serve for upper rooms. Everywhere a great dusting, and scrubbing, and refurbishing was in course of execution, extra hands having been procured from Grundon; and carpenters, painters, and upholsterers were at work. Gardeners were busy outside the house reducing the long-neglected shrubbery to order, and so carving and clipping, and digging and delving, that had there been any truth in the legend that the spirit of a former Fairhoe haunted the place, it would surely have appeared to remonstrate against so wanton an interference with its resort. Lawns and flower-beds were trimmed into symmetry. Everything was in dire confusion everywhere, and it needed an experienced hand to bring order out of such a chaos of pails, and brooms, and brushes, and dusters; such a flood of slopping, and painting, and scrubbing; such a babel of scolding, and calling, and beating, and clinking, as pervaded the entire house. Women from neighbouring cottages, who had been called in to help, gossiped with the female servants, and sat long at their meals, which were taken in a sort of gipsy fashion in any room where they were supposed to be engaged at the moment. They professed not to care about regular meal times, and declared themselves contented with a "snack;" but these snacks were of a toothsome and substantial kind, and were discussed with a gusto which made their consumption rather more formidable than a regular sit-down dinner, while the accompaniment of strongish ale enlivened the labour of mastication. The hand which might have controlled all these discordant elements was still; for the good old housekeeper had been gathered to her rest in Grundon Churchyard in a grave not far from the vault which belonged to the family she had served so long and so faithfully; and in her place there reigned a retainer of the house of Bullpoint, under whose orders two French cooks had been temporarily engaged to perform culinary feats at a moment's notice. The "chef" and his assistant looked with ineffable contempt upon the arrangements of the kitchen, and spoke with derisive grimaces of the primitive utensils which had always sufficed for the preparation of those dishes for which the Fairhoe board was once famous in the county. A cartload of stewpans and other iron and block-tin devices came down from London, and they even talked coolly of building up a new apparatus to supersede the old-fashioned range and hot plate. The scullerymaid and helpers listened with mingled awe and admiration; the cook retired to the butler's pantry and solaced herself as well as she was able by abusing the whole tribe of "foreigneerers and such like," swearing that they should all be poisoned, and that she "wouldn't touch a bit o' vittles o' their dressin', with their messin' and kickshaws." The groom set afloat a report that the ditches about Fairhoe meadows had been netted for frogs: and there were not wanting credible witnesses who had seen M. Croquette in private conversation with a ratcatcher, who had just come with a cageful of rats from Farmer Handytop's rickyard.

So the whole establishment was divided, and the confusion grew hourly worse until it had reached its climax, on the very day of Oswald's return. He was driven out of doors; and had no refuge but his own room or his mother's boudoir, where breakfast and a late dinner were served, so he spent much time in the woods and in going backwards and forwards to Grundon to order this or that addition to the coming festival, in which he began to feel an interest that made him somehow more than half ashamed.

Mrs. Fairhoe looked at him with a swiftly flying colour in her face. "Mittens has gone away," she answered, with a rather forced smile upon her pale lips; "I have procured a situation for her in town. She refused to remain here any longer, Oswald; and through a circumstance that must be inquired into. Do you know that she had (I can't imagine in what way) offended some of these wretched gipsies who are always hanging about our land, and they threatened her. She declared that she had been warned not to be out after dark about Fairhoe; and once, just before you went to London, she was away for a whole day, and, when she came home, declared that she had been followed from Grundon by a young man and two women, who fastened her into a barn, where she remained till late in the evening. Your uncle Ralph heard her screaming there, and let her out. Indeed, I remember that he had to bring her home, and afterwards advised me to get rid of the gipsies from the neighbourhood. I shall see what can be done—or, at least, I hope you will, Oswald. We'll consult my brother on the subject. I told you I had asked him to recommend a new steward to us, I think?"

"You said something about it," said Oswald; "but we shall see. I don't see why we should break the old family custom and turn the gipsies off Fairhoe land. No good fortune would come of it."

"Why, you're not superstitious, my boy. What harm can they do you, or what good either? A mere set of thieving, skulking beggars, who grow bold by sufferance."

She had, fortunately, turned the conversation from

Miss Mittens, but Oswald was still thoughtful and pre-occupied, and she left him to superintend some of those derangements to which she could see no end, and which bade fair never to be concluded in time, for she had issued invitations for a large party on an evening which was now only a week off, and not a thing was in its place. Only a week, and yet so much depending, as she believed, on the result of this gathering.

Her brother and his wife had promised to come and help her in the plans that she had formed for the future. What these plans were may be gathered from the fact that Lady Flakestone, the widow of a late Cabinet Minister, had accepted an invitation for herself and her daughter, Caroline Blamyre, both of whom would come in the Bullpoint carriage. Some of the neighbouring gentry had gladly held themselves disengaged to meet these distinguished persons. There were to be two or three officers in cavalry regiments, a young Government official or two, and some young ladies in their second or third season as eligible partners for the evening quadrille, or that quiet "mooning" in the drawing-room which is so nearly allied to flirtation as to be infinitely agreeable in the absence of more exciting amusement. The Vicar, of course, would come. Good old High Churchman and gentlemanly priest as he was, he would appreciate the reappearance of some of that old madeira, none of which had been opened since the year of Waterloo. Everybody had accepted, and even though she had succumbed to the policy of asking Ralph and his daughter, they would be obscured in such superior company. There could be no better cure for Oswald's foolish philandering than to force a contrast between the little neglected Amina, just home from some obscure French *pension*, and the proud and dignified Caroline Blamyre, whose dowry would so handsomely replenish the almost exhausted lands of Fairhoe. Not a guest would be wanting; but what could be done to reduce the domestic chaos to order?

Only one plan suggested itself, and the sole objection to it lay in the fact that she had been a little negligent of the claims of her relationship during the past four or five years; but what is a polite education worth if it has not included the art of making specious excuses? Let her once have the person before her whom she desired to conciliate, and few people could surpass Mrs. Blundell Fairhoe in this exquisite accomplishment. It was quite astonishing how so proud a woman could beg forgiveness in such a plaintive tone; and people to whom she apologised grew quite ashamed of having exacted such contrition from so cold and haughty a nature. Was there anything astonishing in this power of hers? Her kind of pride and a mean treachery are very closely allied, both being born of selfishness. And so she sat down and wrote a note to Mrs. Gabriel, imploring her dear sister to come and help her to entertain their visitors, and to come at once, that they might have a day or two of quiet together, before the other guests arrived. Of course that most amiable woman put her best plain dove-coloured silk dress and all her simple ornaments into a trunk, and came off directly, carefully concealing from herself the fact that she was only required to meet some sudden emergency.

She came, and saw, and conquered, in the way that such gentle natures do mould events by the force of their own mighty meekness. Everybody came under its influence somehow. The French *chef* tossed up a dainty little dinner with his own bejewelled hands on the very day after her arrival, the former cook consenting to stir melted butter in a new porcelain pipkin. John the factotum was heard to laugh at a joke of his London rival, and even took a pinch of snuff out of his German silver snuffbox, which caused him to retire into the back kitchen to sneeze; and the liveried functionary himself so far forgot his dignity as to be seen, without his coat, and enveloped in a coarse apron, on the bottom round of a ladder.

When the momentous day arrived everything was in readiness, and the sisters were sitting once more in the long drawing-room, with its low-ceilinged nook transformed into a kind of ante-chamber, half veiled by curtains of blue and silver; its rare old jars freshly filled with delicately-scented blooms, its cabinets agape at their own curious carving and barbaric ornament, and the reflection of a score of wax-lights glittering in cut glass and pearl and gold.

Of course, Mrs. Gabriel had learned all about Oswald. Her sister could scarcely keep this secret from her, and, indeed, she felt some sort of relief in talking of it to that gentle soul, who, now dressed almost like a

Quakeress, in soft whites and greys, looked with tender interest at her nephew, who stood at the window watching for the coming guests. What a contrast between the two women! Mrs. Blundell, with her erect bearing, proud, handsome face, and the rich dress which became her so well, and was only just subdued into a more impressive splendour by the tokens of mourning which she yet retained, rose at the sound of carriage wheels, and stood upon the landing to greet her visitors. Her sister shrunk a little into the shadow beyond the glare of the lustres on the chimney-piece. Oswald ran down into the hall. Some of the country gentry and two Government officials; then a guardsman; then the Vicar, brisk, beaming, almost frosty in the youthful freshness that seemed to have been renewed with his grey hairs; upright as a dart, and with his well-fitting clerical coat falling over shoulders that were, if anything, less rounded than they had been in his college days. Then came a long pause of broken conversation amongst the gentlemen, as servants were heard carrying the luggage, and bedroom doors clapped to and fro on the upper landing where the ladies retired to their rooms. They had come down again and were gathered about the fire, for the evening had set in chill, when Ralph Fairhoe made his appearance with his daughter on his arm. No one knew they had arrived until the servant announced them at the door; but every eye was turned as they came into the room, and quite a flutter ran round the little circle of ladies by the fire, while some of the gentlemen put up their eye-glasses. Even Mrs.

Blundell Fairhoe was moved to surprise as she saw Amina quaintly, but faultlessly dressed, and noted the strange, half-defiant beauty of her face and the suppressed force of her bearing. Nobody could define the cause or trace it in the clothes or ornaments she wore; but there was something strikingly brilliant in her whole appearance. This was the first impression; the second was, that the brilliancy did not last—it faded out somewhat on closer inspection, just as the bright colours and changing sheen of stage costumes, seem to fade and tarnish a little when they are brought too far from the footlights. Her entrée only wanted something to make it a triumph; but that something was absent, though she was the centre of attraction for about half the people present till dinner was announced—the centre of attraction, that is, until the grinding of wheels were again heard outside, and the Honourable Mr. Bullpoint entered with Miss Caroline Blamyre on his arm. This imperial lady was greeted with an almost audible buzz of admiration, which seemed to say, "Ah! here we have the real thing—now, indeed, we can understand what we were brought together to see." Even the guardsman was moved to say "By Jove!" and to twirl his heavy moustache, as he instinctively drew himself up, and seemed to be comparing his own height and bulk with the magnificent figure which had just entered. She swept in with a laugh which expressed, without any further remark, how conscious she was of her own fine presence, and of the admiration which was her due, and greeted the mistress of the house with a dignity only just less than her own, and with a pride which was more commanding, though less cold and unfeeling. Then she took Oswald's arm, and was introduced here and there, nodding and smiling to the youngest Government official, who was the son of a peer, and stopping to whisper to one of the elder officers, who was a cousin by marriage. With the Vicar she was especially gracious, and tapped him on the arm reprovingly at one of those compliments for which the old gentleman was always famous in the company of pretty women. When they had moved round the room to the table where Amina sat pretending to look at a volume of engravings, but watching the pair with heightened colour and a trembling lip, Oswald asked leave to present his cousin, and the two women stood opposite each other. "This is my cousin, Amina, who is almost a stranger to me, too," he said awkwardly, "she has only lately come to live in England."

"Ah! indeed. I perceive Mademoiselle has quite the French air," she said, with the least flicker of a smile. "Miss——," she paused till Oswald supplied the name. "Miss Amina Fairhoe will give me the pleasure of her acquaintance during her stay here, I hope, for, believe me, I remember with a very lively sympathy how useful it is to have a friend on one's first advance into English society."

There was something in her voice and manner which utterly routed her poor little rival, who let her pass without a word. Even Oswald, knowing what he knew of his cousin, could scarcely decide whether there was any recognition in that faint smile, or sarcasm in that even, mellow tone.

He glanced back as they passed and saw the look of defiance intensified in Amina's face as she bent once more over the table; but he had forgotten it again presently, for dinner was announced, and he sat beside the reigning beauty, and the Vicar was witty, and the old madeira went round, and the French "chef" had fulfilled his pledge, and all went merrily in spite of that death's head of a secret which was for a time covered by the festive wreath.

He had forgotten it, too, as he sat beside Miss Blamyre's chair in the drawing-room, when the company had drawn into groups and the coffee was handed round. But Amina had not. She had charmed a young ensign of dragoons, and had awakened quite a lively interest in the otherwise placid bosom of a secretary of a department; but she was almost heedless of both and watching that pair as they sat unconscious both of her scrutiny and of the lowering regards of her father, as he looked out from the recess of a window, and cursed his folly in throwing away the chance of Flasher Skidd's skill.

There was a buzz of conversation all about the room, amidst which an occasional laugh and the clinking of spoons in the coffee cups were the only sounds audible, when the new footman from London threw open the door and announced "Mr. Walter Fair-o, of Kingston, Jimaker." Everybody paused, while the mistress of the house looked up surprised at hearing the name of an uninvited guest; and in the midst of this sudden silence a small, slender gentleman, with lace at his wrists and bosom, and a white cambric necktie, which set off his dark complexion and piercing black eyes, walked into the room and waited for somebody to speak to him.

END OF VOL. I.

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